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The Apothecary Diaries

"Please, sir, be reasonable."
Rikuson looked on, sympathetic, well aware of how demanding Lakan could be when he was in one of his moods. Onsou gave him a dirty look.
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“It—It’s you!”
he said, pointing dramatically at Maomao.

“Gotcha!”
Chue cried and held the net aloft. She looked so thoroughly proud of herself that it was hard not to be a little annoyed by her.

Lihaku stood by the wall, keeping watch, but he had some walnuts and was discreetly cracking the shells.
The host of this gathering was the quack doctor.
Tianyu popped dried jujubes into his mouth in between bits of chitchat.
"Hullo, young lady! Welcome home!"

"There must be better ways to do that, sir."
"Is that an invitation to utilize these... ways?"

The Apothecary Diaries

Introduction

Why the Summons to the Western Capital?

Maomao and the others have safely arrived at the western capital. As the Emperor's younger brother, Jinshi has much to do, but here he's treated as a figure of authority in name only. Then a mysterious spirit called a *feitouman* appears at their lodgings, and Maomao springs into action to discover what the apparition really is.

That's not her only problem, though. She's also trying to understand why the Yi clan, former rulers of the western reaches, were exterminated. What do they have to do with the Windreader tribe and its priests? Fifty years ago, there was a plague of insects; seventeen years ago, the Yi were destroyed. Riddles pile upon riddles, even as a prophesied catastrophe looms ever nearer. Until finally, the true reason Gyoku-ou summoned Jinshi to the western capital begins to become clear...

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Character Profiles

Character Profiles

Maomao
Formerly an apothecary in the pleasure district. Downright obsessed with medicines and poisons, but largely uninterested in other matters. Has deep respect for her adoptive father Luomen. Twenty years old.

Jinshi
The Emperor's younger brother. Inhumanly beautiful. He's remarkably down to earth for someone so gorgeous, but there's no telling what he might do if he lets himself go. Has an inferiority complex about his no-more-than-average intellectual abilities. Real name: Ka Zuigetsu. Twenty-one years old.

Basen
Gaoshun's son; Jinshi's attendant. Doesn't feel pain as acutely as most people, which gives him far greater physical capacities than most. He's very serious, but that makes him easy to tweak. In love with Consort Lishu.

Gaoshun
Basen's father. A well-built soldier, he was formerly Jinshi's attendant, but now he serves the Emperor personally. He's accompanying Jinshi on his expedition by order of His Majesty.

Chue
Baryou's wife, and mother of his child. Not strikingly attractive, but she makes up for it with her initiative and silly personality.

Lakan
Maomao's biological father and Luomen's nephew. A freak with a monocle. He's a high-ranking member of the military, but his bizarre behavior causes people to avoid him. He loves Go and Shogi and is a

formidable player.

Empress Gyokuyou
The Emperor's legal wife. An exotic beauty with red hair and green eyes. Twenty-two years old.

Rikuson
Once Lakan's aide, he now serves in the western capital. He has a photographic memory for people's faces.

Gyokuen
Empress Gyokuyou's father. Officially the ruler of the western capital, but when his daughter ascended to the throne he moved to the royal capital.

Gyoku-ou
Gyokuen's eldest son; Empress Gyokuyou's half-brother. Currently leads the western capital while his father is away.

Suiren
Jinshi's lady-in-waiting and former wet nurse.

Taomei
Basen's mother and Gaoshun's wife. Blind in one eye. A "masterpiece of a woman" who reminds one of a predatory animal. Six years older than Gaoshun.

Baryou
Gaoshun's son and Basen's older brother. Spends most of his time hidden behind a curtain.

Tianyu
One of Maomao's colleagues; a young physician. He can seem frivolous, and he has a thing for En'en. He's quick to stick his nose in whenever something interests him.

Dr. You
An upper physician who hails from the western capital.

Lahan’s Brother
Older brother of Lahan; Lakan’s nephew and adopted son. A perfectly ordinary person who shines when offering quips.

Prologue

A bell tinkled, clear and distinct. The young woman who climbed out of the carriage had the same red hair as Gyokuyou. A veil worked with silver embroidery hid her face, and she wore a robe of wonderful, shining silk.

Gyokuyou wondered how old she was. The girl was supposed to be her niece, but she didn't recall having any such nubile young relatives. All her nephews and nieces had been older than her, and so very mean. Yet her own brother, Gyoku-ou, swore this girl was his daughter, so it must be so. She had to go along with it.

"Lady Gyokuyou," said someone behind her. It was Koku-u, the middle of a trio of sisters who served as her ladies-in-waiting. She gave her mistress a worried look.

"Don't fret, dear one. Are we prepared to receive her?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Gyokuyou was at one of the Emperor's villas. She'd received special permission to meet her niece here, outside the court proper. No consort was allowed to leave the rear palace, but Gyokuyou was the Empress. She had certain rights.

The young woman in the beautiful robe approached with graceful footsteps and knelt before Gyokuyou. "Lady Gyokuyou, I believe this is the first time we've met. My name is Yaqin."

"Raise your head. You must be tired from such a long journey. For today, rest and regain your strength here in this villa." Gyokuyou smiled at Yaqin. She could see the girl's eyes behind the veil, deep green like hers. Everything from the color of her skin to the cast of her face spoke to a prominent strain of foreign blood.

She was quite charming on first impression, in fact. She had an innocence about her—still room to grow and mature—accompanied by the anxiousness of someone venturing into a world they knew little of. Deep within those emerald eyes, though, could be seen a determination working to assert itself.

They were much alike. Yes, Gyokuyou had looked much the same when she had first arrived in the capital, first come to the rear palace. Did

this girl, too, harbor some private resolution? Let her. Gyokuyou would attend to her own business.

"How would you like your meal? We can make it in the style of the western capital for you. Or would you prefer to try the local cuisine?" Gyokuyou gave Yaqin a teasing smile; it enveloped the girl, who smiled back uncomfortably.

Her niece was here from the west, but why? Would she try to gain His Majesty's Imperial affection now that Gyokuyou's former place was vacant? Or did she have her eye on the Emperor's younger brother?

For Gyokuyou's purposes, it didn't matter. She took Yaqin's hand, and felt her niece stiffen.

"You're so cold, and your skin is so dry," she said. "Let me get you some moisturizer. The sea air is simply terrible for the skin."

The girl was openly wary of Gyokuyou. If this was an act, it was a superb one. If it wasn't, it only showed that they hadn't spent long teaching her the tricks of gaining a person's heart and mind. There was never enough time to teach a consort-to-be all the things she ought to know, dancing and singing and politics.

Gyokuyou took the moisturizer from Koku-u, then rubbed some on her own hand to demonstrate that it was safe. Her niece still looked doubtful; perhaps she was just that anxious. That was all right, as far as Gyokuyou was concerned. Let her be as suspicious as she wanted. Gyokuyou wrapped her in a smile as soft as silk. She would wrap her in layer after layer of smiles, until every thorn, every needle she might have was covered over. She would take the child into her bosom and hold her gently.

Gyokuyou rubbed her niece's hand. Some might consider it unseemly, but the warmth returned to Yaqin's fingers.

Koku-u was frowning, but she didn't argue with Gyokuyou. Gyokuyou was glad that Hongniang, who was her chief lady-in-waiting and by rights should have been here, wasn't present. Gyokuyou had asked her to take care of some other business. She felt a little guilty, but this was going to be easier without her.

Gyokuyou's job was to smile. To never let that smile slip or fade.

That was her one weapon. Her father Gyokuen had found it and taught her to wield it.

Chapter 1: Return to the Western Capital

Maomao wiped her brow as she looked out of the carriage. The sun pounded down, baking the earth. The people who followed behind the vehicle on foot wore conical traveling hats, but it wouldn't save them from the reflected light, which would still be strong enough to tan the skin.

So, a year later, and I'm back, Maomao thought. The last time she'd come, it had been a little earlier in the year, and not quite so hot. At least there was no humidity—the sweat she wiped at dried quickly—but it was still blazing.

The quack doctor had promptly succumbed to the heat and was curled up in a corner of the carriage.

"What this place needs is a little greenery! That would make things better," Chue observed. She held out a leather pouch of water flavored with the rind of some sort of citrus fruit. Even the lukewarm drink was better than nothing on Maomao's parched throat. "You've been here before, right, Miss Maomao?"

"Yes, last year."

She certainly hadn't expected to be back again this year. Most commoners never took a trip this long in their entire lives.

"But you weren't here very long, right? Let Miss Chue show you around this time! You can see the sights! Enjoy yourself!" There was a gleam in her eyes. The less something had to do with work, the more eager she was to do it.

"No, thank you, I have a job to do." Maomao would have loved to go sightseeing, to finally see the entire city and sample all the medicinal herbs and other plant life for sale at this nexus of trade. But there was one person she had to keep an eye on at all times. Jinshi.

That son of a...!

Even now, the memory made her blood boil, and she suspected it always would.

"Miss Maomao! Miss Maomao! You look tense," Chue said and began massaging Maomao's cheeks. It seemed like somehow, someone always

ended up doing that.

"O-Oh, do I?"

"I'm sure they'd be perfectly happy for you to go out all day if you told them it was to inspect your surroundings. Just make sure you call me when you do!"

She just wants me to be her excuse!

Chue was easy to talk to, and better than any of the *other* potential minders who might be assigned to her, but still...

"Oh me, oh my! We've been talking so much that we've arrived!"

A town of stone and brick came into view. It was dotted with green trees, and a lake sparkled in the distance. Awnings fluttered here and there to keep off the sun. The carriage rolled right on, toward a great mansion. For a moment, Maomao thought they were going to the same house she'd been to last year, but then she realized it was the one next door to that.

"So this is the administrative office!" Chue said, looking at a stone plaque on the front of the building.

The carriage stopped at the gate. The other physicians were already waiting inside.

"Ah, is that everybody?" said the dark-skinned Dr. You, waving to them.

"Okay, Miss Maomao, Miss Chue has other things to do. So!"

"Right. Thank you very much."

"Don't mention it!" Chue pitter-pattered away, into the administrative building.

"Over here!" Dr. You called. He was standing with Tianyu and one of the other physicians. Maomao and the quack went over to him, with Lihaku following at an unobtrusive distance.

"Have you been here before, Dr. You?" Tianyu drawled.

"Yes, plenty of times. That was back before this was a bureaucratic office, though. I'm from the western capital myself, you know. A native son of I-sei Province. I know where the eastern villa is, more or less."

"Huh!" said Tianyu, who didn't sound very interested in the answer despite having asked the question.

Before it was an office, huh? Maomao thought. As they walked inside, she pondered what it might have been used for before. It did indeed feel more like a rich person's house than a proper administrative building. *Maybe it's a mansion they confiscated from someone who wasn't paying their taxes?*

That was entirely her imagination, but it was enough to pass the time until they arrived at the villa. The medical supplies were already there.

"What should we do next?" the serious-looking physician asked Dr. You.

"Let's see. The plan is for us to split into three groups, just like we did on the ships. The Moon Prince will be at Lord Gyoku-ou's annex, Grand Commandant Kan will be here in the administrative office, and our man Lu from the Board of Rites will be in Lord Gyoku-ou's main house."

The good doctor seemed to refer to one of those men very differently from the others. Maybe they were close personally, or perhaps in rank?

"Should we split up into the same groups we did on the boats, then?" the other doctor asked.

"Hmm. I think something a little different today," Dr. You said. He grabbed Tianyu and pushed him toward Maomao and the quack.

"Huh? I'm with them, sir?" Tianyu asked. "I was sure I would be with Dr. Li again."

Maomao agreed. Li was evidently the remaining physician. The name was also extremely common—so much so that it was no help in telling people apart, and those surnamed Li often found themselves called by their full names. Lihaku was a handy example of that phenomenon.

"We tried to take all possible factors into account when we made that decision. You can be with Dr. Li—*provided* that you can mind your mouth. I heard about your little gaffes on the ship." Evidently Tianyu had given lip to some high officials.

"But I might be just as rude anywhere else! Um... Where *am* I going?"

"To the annex. I'm going to be in the administrative office here, and Dr. Li will be at the main residence."

"That would mean I'm in the same building as the Imperial younger brother, wouldn't it? Wouldn't that only have the potential to make things worse?"

That implied Maomao would also be in Jinshi's building. She might have guessed as much.

"Hah! Hoping to get a chance to do an exam on the Moon Prince? Good luck. I doubt you'll even see him much." Dr. You smacked Tianyu on the shoulder. Tianyu rubbed it painfully.

Dr. You continued, “You’ll make the perfect group. Niangniang is good at mixing up medicines, which is precisely what you aren’t, Tianyu. But you’re the best surgeon among the new crop. This will be the perfect opportunity for you to learn from each other.”

That would be great, if Niangniang were here, Maomao thought, but she didn’t bother correcting him. She’d decided that if it didn’t actively harm her, she could live with it. She glanced at the quack doctor. *He doesn’t even seem to be on the list.* And he didn’t seem to realize it either.

“I only hope I can be a good teacher,” the quack said, fidgeting. Maomao looked away from him.

“Lookin’ forward to it, partner!” Tianyu said, slapping Maomao on the back.

“We are *not* partners.”

Maomao stood before the quack doctor, who flushed with embarrassment and hid behind her.

“I look forward to working with you, big guy!” Tianyu said.

“Y-Yes, it’ll be my pleasure,” the quack said. Tianyu evidently didn’t take him very seriously.

“You may be with a new group, but your job hasn’t changed. Doctors look after their patients—and nothing else! Each group will have a junior official assigned to it to act as a messenger in case anything comes up. Don’t hesitate to use them.”

It was nice working with Dr. You; he made things simple. Maomao knew the personnel on this trip had been selected for their ability to adapt to a rapidly changing situation, but he had a special ease that must have come from being on his home soil.

“You heard him. Shall we get going?” Tianyu asked, picking up his stuff.

Administrative office, main building, and annex: two of the three of them belonged to Gyoku-ou outright, which served to demonstrate how powerful he was. The office and the main house were right next to each other; the annex was a five-minute walk away. Each of them fronted the main street, but inside the administrative building the hubbub outside was hardly audible. It was just that big. The walls and the trees outside probably also helped block out the noise.

Maomao and her three companions were joined by the junior official who would serve as their messenger, the five of them shown to their building by a man who looked to be a local. As they stepped out the gate,

they got a good view of the town.

Lihaku once again maintained a respectful distance, but Tianyu kept glancing back at him. *I guess it does seem sort of odd*, thought Maomao—a few ordinary physicians being given a bodyguard? To say nothing of the fact that the quack himself was personally in charge of Jinshi's care. Tianyu was too sharp not to wonder why Maomao and the quack were being entrusted with the Imperial younger brother. She worried about when he might start asking questions, but for the time being she tried to act like everything was normal. She could at least play innocent until he specifically pressed her about it.

"My! Isn't this exciting?" If the quack had still had his mustache, it would have been all a-quiver. He wasn't a particularly brave eunuch, but at the moment his timidity seemed to be outweighed by his excitement at seeing the western capital.

Tianyu, too, was looking everywhere at once. His expression never changed, though, and he seemed less like he was having fun and more like he was taking careful stock of everything.

I'm never sure what to make of this guy. Maomao could never tell what he was thinking. She had figured out, though, that he was quick to latch on to anything that piqued his curiosity. If she knew what that was, she might be able to anticipate how he'd react—but she still didn't know what he found interesting.

"Hm?" Tianyu said, tilting his head quizzically as they left the office. Maomao wondered what was up—and then she saw a familiar face. The owner of the face seemed to recognize them too, because he trotted over.

"It's been much too long," he said with a respectful bow of the head and a gentle smile. It was the pretty-boy, Rikuson. The freak strategist's former aide.

That's right. I heard he transferred to the western capital.

He was more tanned than the last time Maomao had seen him, no doubt from the strong sunlight in these parts. Two attendants walked behind him.

"It has, sir," said Maomao.

"Yeah, haven't seen you in a bit," said Tianyu at almost the same time. Only the quack was left out of the loop. He looked at Maomao as if to ask who this person was.

"Do you two know each other?" Maomao asked, looking from Rikuson to Tianyu and back.

"Yes, in that I never forget someone I've met." Rikuson smiled.

Maomao sensed something tired in the expression. She also noticed that his clothes were dusty and there was mud all over his shoes.

"The first thing they told us when we started at court was to learn what the strategist's aide looked like," Tianyu said.

"Ahh. I see," Maomao said. Tianyu might have greeted Rikuson familiarly, but he didn't actually know or care that much about him. The quack, meanwhile, shifted uncomfortably, feeling shy around this stranger. For once, Maomao couldn't just let everyone else do the talking.

"This is the master physician. I've come to the western capital to assist him," she said.

"Master physician?" Rikuson asked with a puzzled look at the quack.

Oh! His name. His name is...uh...

Damn! She'd almost forgotten it again. She thought it was Gu... Guen? But she decided not to say it aloud. Instead she said, "If I tell you he's the physician who served many years at the rear palace, would you know who I mean?"

Ah. Neatly done.

Rikuson clapped his hands. "Yes! This is him?"

That was a close one. I almost forgot.

The quack was a body double for her own father, Luomen, and he was being treated as if he were his more august counterpart. Rikuson, for his part, would surely be familiar with Luomen, who was the freak strategist's uncle. He would probably also grasp that the quack was the only physician in the rear palace.

Never know if the walls might have eyes or ears.

They were still technically in Li, but the western capital was as good as foreign territory. More to the point, both of Rikuson's attendants appeared to be locals—Maomao couldn't afford to say anything careless. She would have to watch how she spoke.

Maomao didn't have anything particular to talk about with Rikuson, and she was keen to get out of there before anyone gave the game away. "I'm sure you're busy, Master Rikuson. I apologize for taking up your time," she said.

"Not at all. I'm just now back from traveling for work. It took me quite a ways out, but I knew you all must be arriving soon, so I hurried back. I never expected my timing to be so perfect." He smiled broadly, but it couldn't hide the mud on the hem of his robe. It was dry now, but it was obvious that it had originally been quite dark, rich soil.

Was he out in the fields for some reason?

The western capital was a dry place; puddles were not a common sight on the roads here. Even if they had been, the dust would have been whiter, lacking in nutrients. The only place he could have picked up fertile earth like what was clinging to his outfit was in a field that had been watered. Maybe he was coming back from whatever village was closest to the water. Hurrying to get back, he hadn't had time to worry about how he looked.

So nobody told him when exactly we were going to arrive? Lengthy trip or no, she would have expected Rikuson to know at least that much.

"I must be on my way. I'm afraid if I stand and chat for too long, my former boss might notice me. I'll see you again," said Rikuson. He looked like there was something more he would have wished to say, but he must have been too busy. Tianyu, who knew who he meant by his "former boss," snickered. Only the quack doctor was left entirely in the dark, and he spent the entire conversation looking sad. Maomao would have to explain to him who Rikuson was while they were on their way to their destination.

She found herself with a lot to think about, but she also remembered what Dr. You had said to them.

Doctors look after their patients—and nothing else.

Maomao was an apothecary. So she would do an apothecary's job—and nothing else.

Chapter 2: Boss and Former Boss

Rikuson heaved a sigh as he returned to his room, which at the moment was a chamber of the administrative building that he had appropriated as his living quarters.

“Is this purely about making my life hard?” he muttered, shucking off his sand- and mud-covered outfit.

It was quite a while ago that Rikuson had suggested a tour of the farming villages, but Gyoku-ou had only approved the idea a few days earlier. Rikuson had gone, but an unsettling premonition had brought him hurrying back—and now here he was.

“When I left for the villages, everyone told me they were going to arrive substantially later than expected.”

They being the visitors from the capital he had encountered moments ago. He had to admit, he’d never expected his former superior’s esteemed daughter to be among the entourage.

“Of *course* Master Lakan came,” Rikuson mused. Even the seasickening prospect of ship travel wouldn’t have deterred him from joining this trip. With all due respect to the esteemed daughter, Maomao, Rikuson found the idea faintly amusing. When he had been told that his former boss would arrive in about ten days, he’d set aside the five days before that for his trip to the farming villages. But then...

Rikuson brushed off his overrobe, getting sand everywhere. He would have loved to wash properly, but there was no time. There was hardly even a moment to wipe himself down. His only choice was to take an incense cake and daub some around his neck. In these parts, “incense” usually meant either perfume or a cake like this one, and Rikuson had only one of each on hand. One was a perfume that Gyoku-ou had given him as a joke, while the cake was one that he’d been hard-sold on while walking around town.

That was his choice of incense today. A cheap product like this was perfect—incense in the western capital tended to have strong fragrances, so something cheap that didn’t smell quite as much was ideal. He rubbed in just enough to mask the smell of sweat, and as a final touch he pasted a smile on his face.

A smile was essential for doing business, his mother had told him. Never let it slip in front of a customer.

Rikuson wondered what Gyoku-ou would think to see him back so much earlier than expected. Things could get a little awkward if his former boss was there, but so it went. He cinched his belt and left the room.

"It's been some time, sir," Rikuson said, forcing himself to act completely natural as he entered the hall. Gyoku-ou and his subordinates were there, along with the guests, enjoying a light meal. Servants bustled in and out with the food. It was too early for dinner, but the offerings looked sumptuous all the same.

Rikuson recognized all the guests—naturally. He wouldn't forget them. The stubbly man with the monocle was Lakan. His former superior; he would know him anywhere. Beside Lakan sat his aide, Onsou. He had been around since before Rikuson had served Lakan; when Rikuson had taken over, he distinctly remembered Onsou coming to him with tears of gratitude in his eyes.

Onsou was a capable man, but he had an unfortunate tendency to draw life's short straws—a tendency to which he might as well have resigned himself the moment he found his way into Lakan's orbit.

Onsou saw Rikuson come in; he gave a slight bow and whispered to Lakan. Lakan looked at Rikuson with the same vacant expression he always wore. If Onsou hadn't said something, he would probably never have realized Rikuson was there. Rikuson was sometimes curious exactly what he looked like to the strategist.

Lakan beckoned Rikuson over, but he wasn't sure if he should approach the strategist out of the blue. He looked to Gyoku-ou. The interim ruler of the western capital waved at him from his place of honor at the table to go pay his respects.

Rikuson felt very awkward indeed. Onsou was looking at him with an expression that was hard to describe—he seemed to be wondering whose side Rikuson was on. Between his current boss and his former boss, Onsou ought to have understood to whom Rikuson's present position made him beholden.

Lakan, meanwhile, munched on some fried food, seemingly indifferent to the situation. The food first passed through the hands of a lady-in-waiting Rikuson didn't recognize, who left only the merest scraps for Lakan's consumption. Rikuson might have assumed she was his food

taster, but if so, she was keeping most of the meal for herself. Lakan simply got her leftovers.

He'd heard the Imperial younger brother would be coming to the city, but at the moment he didn't see him. This didn't seem to be a public banquet; Lakan had probably accepted the invitation without thinking anything of it, but Onsou's brimming eyes made it clear that he was supposed to have politely refused.

"Ahem, ah...Rikuson, I want to eat that one bun," Lakan said. At first Rikuson had been sure Lakan had forgotten his name, but it turned out that wasn't true. As for "that one bun," he added, "Onsou says he doesn't know which bun I mean, but I told him! *That* bun!"

Rikuson agreed with Onsou: that wasn't enough to go on. Was that why Lakan had called him over? Because he wanted a snack bun?

Rikuson searched his memory. "You're talking about something sweet, yes, sir?"

"Of course I am."

"Does it have any filling?"

"I don't think so."

So it wasn't a red bean filling that made this bun sweet.

"Is it covered in sauce, or do you dip it in anything?"

"Ah, the sauce! Yes, there was a sauce! That white stuff—I love it!"

Rikuson finally connected the dots. "Master Lakan. Are you talking about the fried buns from the Liuliu Fandian?" The name meant "The Double Six Restaurant"; it was a place Lakan had gone once, and several times after that, he'd sent Rikuson to buy the buns.

"Sir Onsou. Fry up a mandarin roll, then top it with sweetened condensed milk," he said.

"I'm on it."

There was a mandarin roll already in front of Lakan; that must have been what put him in mind of the Liuliu's creation.

"Fried bread with condensed milk? Sounds tasty!" said the woman who appeared to be Lakan's food taster, her eyes sparkling. She didn't seem much like your ordinary lady-in-waiting—another of Lakan's "finds," perhaps.

"Miss Chue, perhaps you'd be so kind as to taste slightly *less* of the food for poison," Onsou said. So her name was Chue. Onsou's touch of deference suggested she wasn't Lakan's lady-in-waiting so much as someone who had been borrowed from elsewhere to fill this role.

“Oops! My bad,” Chue said.

If nothing else, this conversation proved to Rikuson that Lakan was still Lakan.

“I can have the rolls prepared for your snack tomorrow, sir,” Onsou said.

“I want them for dinner tonight!”

“Please, sir, be reasonable. We’re already at a banquet!” Onsou’s voice came out in a squeak; he didn’t seem able to muster much more. Rikuson looked on, sympathetic, well aware of how demanding Lakan could be when he was in one of his moods. Onsou gave the former aide a dirty look.

“I see some things never change,” Rikuson said to Onsou in an effort to repair his mood.

“Indeed they don’t. And you seem to have made yourself quite at home here in the west.” Onsou had noticed Rikuson’s suntan and smelled the incense wafting from him. He’d never been the kind to wear incense back in the capital. He only did it here to cover the smell of sweat, but he refrained from saying so; he thought it would sound like an excuse.

“You’ll have to pardon Rikuson. He’s only just gotten back from quite a long trip,” said Gyoku-ou as he took a bite of meat. Evidently he had been listening to their conversation.

“O-Oh, I see,” Onsou said, paling to be so suddenly addressed by Gyoku-ou himself. No doubt he hadn’t expected the great man’s conversation to turn to him.

“Is the food to your liking? If there’s anything you want, I can have my chef prepare it immediately.”

“You know the fried dough at the Liuliu Fandian?” Lakan, never one to need asking twice, broke in. The people of the western capital would not, of course, know the fried bread of the royal city.

“Hoh. Please, tell me about it,” Gyoku-ou said. Now that he had expressed a willingness to listen, it would be Rikuson’s job to explain. He felt butterflies flutter in his stomach. This seemed likely to be his lot for the foreseeable future—not a happy prospect for the ever-anxious Rikuson.

Chapter 3: The Annex and the Forgotten Man

Gyoku-ou's annex seemed like quite a comfortable place to be thanks to its abundance of greenery. When one thought of I-sei Province, where the western capital was located, one thought of the desert, but in fact there were many grassy plains. It was dry, yes, but there was more here than sand; there was enough water for herbaceous plants, at least, to grow. Which was not to say that water wasn't precious here.

Was that the main house we stayed in last time? Maomao wondered. There had been lots of green there too. Just having all those trees in the mansion's garden was enough to provide the impression of wealth. Of course, to the people of the capital—who were used to living by the great river, with the sea not so far away—it might have lacked a certain something.

But it's enough to be refreshing.

The garden here was done roughly in the style of the central region, but it was full of plants she had never seen before. Her first thought was that she would love to test their medicinal effects—but, well, that was Maomao for you.

"Young lady! Let's set our luggage down first. It's been such a long trip, and I'm so very tired," the quack said, looking as run-down as he sounded.

"Good idea," said Tianyu. "Hey, Niangniang, once we get to our room, maybe we can play rock-paper-scissors to see who gets to explore the mansion."

Lihaku walked a few paces behind the three of them, keeping watch. The medical office was in a separate building from the mansion. They couldn't exactly complain about the location; sickness was considered an impurity, after all. If the office was anywhere too well traveled, they would only have to worry about infection every time a patient showed up, anyway.

"This is one odd place," the quack said, looking at their building, mystified. "I thought the same thing at the administrative building's

medical office...” It certainly wasn’t what they were used to in Li, and while the western capital had its own architectural style, the building didn’t really seem to belong to that either. It almost looked like...

“Is this a chapel?” Tianyu asked, his hand brushing the bricks.

“Chapel? What’s that?” the quack asked. No wonder he didn’t know the word; there weren’t many chapels in Li, and the quack was hardly what you would call cosmopolitan.

“Think of it like a shrine,” Maomao offered.

“Oh! A place to pray.”

“Yeah. There’s a lot of different religions in this city,” Tianyu said.

They entered the building to find a high-vaulted room. There didn’t appear to be any objects of worship inside; the only vestiges of any faith once practiced here were some decorations on the walls. Maybe some pious person had once lived here. When the place had passed into Gyoku-ou’s hands, he had stopped short of tearing it down, but it was no longer a place of worship.

“It’s the perfect size. Oh, and look! The rest of our belongings have already arrived. Hmm, there really is quite a lot. It’s going to be a job organizing everything. Suppose we just leave them in the boxes?” the quack said.

“Good point. Let’s hurry up and rock-paper-scissors it! Who gets to go exploring?”

Not long ago, Maomao would have eagerly accepted Tianyu’s suggestion. Careful thought, though, left her with a question: Even if she won the game, would the other two actually do their work here? At the same time, she knew she would be annoyed if Tianyu won—and if the quack doctor earned the chance to go exploring, well, that thought was a little nerve-racking too.

In the end, Maomao took the most boring solution. She rolled up her sleeves, tied a handkerchief over her mouth, and said, “Right, exploring comes later! First we need to get this stuff sorted!”

“Aw. You seemed all excited to look around earlier.”

“I’m so very tired from our trip, young lady. Can’t we take things slower?”

“No, we can’t!” Maomao said, rebuffing them both. Their medical supplies could have rotted during the long sea voyage; they needed to know what was still usable and what wasn’t so that they could stock up on anything they needed. “No one leaves this room until we get all of this

organized."

"Oh no..." The quack stuck out his lower lip and looked deeply dejected.

Tianyu didn't look happy about it, but he shuffled over to the supplies and started working.

"What would you like me to do, young lady?" asked the big mutt, Lihaku. He looked like he might just drop to the floor and start doing push-ups to pass the time if she didn't have anything for him to do, so she decided to put him to physical labor.

"Could you get the box by the door and bring it here?" Maomao asked.

"Sure thing! Oof! This is heavy!" It turned out to be a bit much even for Lihaku.

Maomao went over to the box, opened the lid, and peeked in. It was packed with rice husks and sweet potatoes. No wonder it was so heavy. Even Lihaku wouldn't be able to lift it by himself.

"I don't think this is ours," she said.

"What do you think? Should we borrow a cart and haul this somewhere?" Lihaku asked.

"No, I think we can just let someone in charge know and they can deal with it," Maomao replied, pondering whom they should tell.

At just that moment, someone came from the direction of the garden, waving urgently. "Heeey! I think some of my cargo got mixed in with yours," the newcomer called. He was a man with no particular distinguishing characteristics—the only thing notable about him was how unnotable he was. He had unobjectionable looks and was probably twenty-three or twenty-four years old.

I feel like I've seen him somewhere before, Maomao thought, pondering further.

When the newcomer saw Maomao, he stopped short. "It—It's *you*!" he said, pointing dramatically at her. "The one who might be Lahan's sister or might not, I can't tell!"

"The answer is *not*." Now she was sure: she'd had this conversation before. *But who is this guy?* Her eyes drifted to the box full of sweet potatoes. The mention of Lahan's name sparked a memory. "You're Lahan's Brother, aren't you?" Her memory of him was hazy, but she thought that was who he was.

"Lahan is younger than me! Why should *I* have to be defined in terms of *him*?!"

Yes, this was Lahan's Brother, with his delectable reactions. She had met him before, and remembered him mostly for being very normal and offering copious chances for witty interjections. His face, though—that she had completely forgotten.

"Well, I don't know your name," she pointed out.

"My name is—"

"That wasn't an invitation." She'd only just recently, and *finally*, remembered the quack doctor's name. She didn't need any more to learn.

"Listen to me! Let me tell you my name!"

Maomao, however, was in no mood to listen. "More importantly: What are you doing here?" This guy normally spent all his time tending potato fields in the central region.

Lahan's Brother looked scandalized by Maomao's question. Lihaku, having decided that he wasn't a threat, looked on quietly.

"I'm here because they dragged me here! They brought me instead of my father, with orders to teach the people of the western capital how to grow these things!" Maomao sensed some resentment. "These things" referred to the sweet potatoes.

"I take it Lahan duped you into doing this."

"H-H-He did not!"

Lahan's Brother was nothing if not easy to read. And Lahan remained his usual ruthless self.

"Why didn't he ask his father?" Maomao asked. Lahan's Father, La...uh, something or other, loved farming and seemed like he would go to the ends of the earth if there was a field to be tended there.

Lahan's Brother paused. "After his experiment with growing sweet potatoes in the north came to light, he can't get away."

"Experiment?"

"Sweet potatoes yield several times more than a rice crop, so he thought they would be perfect for Shihoku Province, where there's plenty of people and space."

"Right."

Jinshi had been trying everything he could to shore up the food supply, and she seemed to recall Lahan being very bullish on potatoes as well.

"The problem is, sweet potatoes come from the south, so they don't grow well in the north. In fact, I doubt they'll grow at all, but Dad says it's worth trying to figure out what the northern limit is, so I just let him do that."

“I’m not sure this is the time...” Even Maomao could tell that this was a dangerous idea. A famine was looming; they couldn’t spare people and land to satisfy one farmer’s curiosity.

And he had such a pleasant look...

The man had reminded her of Luomen, and evidently when something interested him, he became completely absorbed in it to the exclusion of everything else.

“It would be too risky for *all* the fields to be sweet potatoes, so I brought these too. Have a look.” Lahan’s Brother tossed her something from the box next to the crate of sweet potatoes.

“Regular potatoes? This is a white potato, right?”

It was a big, stout, round potato. Potatoes were a relatively new foodstuff; the matron of the Verdigris House had told Maomao that they weren’t yet widely eaten when she was young.

“That’s right. A tuber like this can grow even in the cold, even if the ground isn’t very fertile, so he made me bring these along. Lahan only knows Nice Dad, but he can be a pretty formidable character when he wants to.”

Lahan’s Father, La-something-or-other by name, was evidently a bona fide member of the La clan. Even Maomao had nearly been taken in by his pleasant countenance.

“Potatoes can be harvested twice a year, so my father has been hell-bent on planting them. I’m afraid he might be trying to use them to fudge his harvest numbers.”

“You seem to know a lot about potatoes,” Maomao observed. She’d taken Lahan’s Brother to be a completely average person with no special qualities other than his vulnerability to a good quip, but it turned out he did have something to offer.

“Wow, you’re a regular farmer!” Lihaku said, clapping Lahan’s Brother on the back. He hadn’t followed the entire conversation, but he was impressed just the same.

“F-Farmer?!” Lahan’s Brother choked. He seemed to want to push back, but he was too enraged to say anything more. The quack doctor, apparently intimidated by Lahan’s Brother’s fury, kept his distance. Tianyu seemed to judge the man simply too *normal* to be interesting.

“So your point is, these potatoes aren’t food, they’re seed crops?” Maomao said.

“Yes, they are! I’m supposed to show the people how to raise them.

Him and his *My older brother can't spend his whole life tied to one place*! How is one field so different from another, anyway?!"

In short, this normal person had demonstrated a normal interest in the outside world and been duped for it. The fact that he had chased down this crate of seed potatoes, though, showed that he was indeed a dedicated farmer. Maomao suspected he would produce a lovely crop, even if he complained the whole time.

Teaching them to grow new crops, huh? That presumably meant Lahan's Brother would be spending his time out in the farming villages.

"When you go out to the villages, take me with you," Maomao said.

"Why would I do that?"

"There's something I want to investigate."

This was a gift from above. She'd assumed she would have to ask Rikuson or someone—until Lahan's Brother had come along.

I saw Rikuson's outfit. The mud-streaked clothes suggested he'd been inspecting a farm somewhere. But what was a man sent all the way from the capital doing relegated to the fringes of his new home?

Maybe he was checking the harvests to make sure no one's cheating on their taxes. Or maybe... *Maybe he knows about the insect plague.*

A plague of insects had struck west of the royal capital, which meant there was a good chance the locusts had come from farther west than that. It would always be easier to deal with a swarm of locusts when there weren't as many of them.

I'm not all that interested in bugs, but I don't think I can get out of this one.

For a second, Maomao found herself thinking of another young woman, one who had liked insects far more than she did.

"Of course, I'm trusting myself to your services today, Master Physician. As ever." Jinshi smiled as he received them. They were in the most sumptuous guest room in the annex. There was a rich, thick, delicately embroidered sheep's wool rug, and the curtains appeared to be made of silk; they shimmered and shone each time the wind ruffled them. Maomao could never help wondering about the market value of Jinshi's accommodations.

That looks good, though, she thought, spying a plate of fruit on the table. There were luscious grapes, so recently chilled that they were still sweating. They promised sweet juice filling the mouth as they burst

between the teeth.

I wonder if he needs them checked for poison.

Sadly, Maomao wasn't there at that moment to taste Jinshi's food. That job fell to Jinshi's lady-in-waiting Taomei. The boisterous Chue was missing today, and Maomao didn't see Baryou either, although she had her suspicions about what was on the other side of the gently rustling curtains. Suiren and Gaoshun stood by the wall.

The quack doctor remained cowed in Jinshi's presence. "Eep! L-Let's get started, then..." As usual, he could barely get the words out, and as usual, his exam was *pro forma* at best.

Tianyu was also absent from this scene. He'd proved too likely to offend someone important to be invited on a visit like this. Tianyu was perceptive enough that he might have looked askance at Maomao and the quack going to do this exam, but if he had any doubts, he had kept them to himself for the moment. Was that because he knew how to take a hint, or had someone on Jinshi's side of things reached out to help him understand? Maomao preferred not to think about it.

I also don't care either way. She had things to do. For now, she would put aside the question of why Jinshi had been consigned to the villa. The freak strategist wasn't in the same building; that was what really mattered.

"All right, young lady, I'll be heading back," the quack said.

"Yes, sir," Maomao replied.

The quack left without so much as a scruple. His bodyguard, Lihaku, went with him.

Jinshi turned down the sparkle just a bit. "Tea, if you would," he said.

"Of course, sir," replied Taomei, and went to prepare it.

"Here you go." Suiren thoughtfully brought a chair, so Maomao sat down. She wasn't rude enough to grab any grapes just then, but she tried to send Suiren a telepathic message that she'd like some as a souvenir.

"How are you settling into your new workplace?" Jinshi asked.

"Easily enough, sir. The personnel haven't changed, so it's just getting used to the new environment." That was the honest answer. What she really wanted now was to find out what kinds of medicine were available in the western capital. When they'd taken stock of what had been used during the ship voyage, it turned out to be chiefly nausea medication and antipyretics. The southern route they'd taken had been as hot as high summer, and combined with the poor air circulation on the ship, they'd had lots of cases of dizziness. Heatstroke was best cured by water, not

medicine, but Maomao suspected that while she was away, the quack had diagnosed many of the cases as colds and handed out antipyretics. That would explain it.

Funny enough, it had worked out: the medicine the quack had prescribed tasted so bad that patients had to take it with plenty of water anyway, so in the end it had cured their heatstroke.

He's sure got luck on his side, she marveled. Even better, she'd heard that they would be given new supplies bought in the western capital to make up the shortfall in their inventory. *Wish I could have gone along on the shopping trip, though.* She was so curious about exactly what drugs were sold here.

Maomao, however, had other things to attend to. She glanced around, then stole a look at Jinshi's side. She wasn't sure how to bring that up, so she settled on changing the subject entirely.

"I gather we have a potato farmer among us, thanks to Lahan's connections."

This was Lahan they were talking about; if they succeeded in cultivating potatoes in I-sei Province, she was sure he intended to go straight into exporting them to Shaoh or something. It was right next door to I-sei, which would minimize shipping costs.

Jinshi gave her a look. "A potato farmer? He's your cousin, is what I heard."

"No relation," she said firmly, so that there would be no mistake.

"But I heard he was Lahan's older brother."

"Yes, but Lahan and I are complete strangers."

Jinshi gave her a harder look, but he went along with it.

"Anyway, yes, we do have a potato farmer here. When I heard he was from the La clan, I expected someone... I don't know. More distinctive."

"Have you met him, sir?"

"I've only seen him in passing. I saw him when Lahan was helping him onto the ship."

In other words, he had spotted them smack in the middle of the dupe.

"He's a very normal person, sir."

"Yes. Very normal." It seemed Jinshi shared Maomao's assessment—but anyway, if he already knew about him, that made everything easier.

"I'd like to accompany him to the farming villages. Do you think I could be given permission?"

"The farming villages? It would help me if you could go, but then how

would you handle your medical duties?" Jinshi patted his flank pointedly.

You did that to yourself, Maomao thought. He already knew how to change the dressings, anyway, so she didn't have to be examining it all the time.

"A young man named Tianyu has been assigned to our group. I think he could manage things, sir," she said, ignoring Jinshi's injury for the moment. She might object to Tianyu as a person, but his actual work seemed trustworthy.

"Hmm... Very well," Jinshi sounded like he had to swallow some objection, but agreed nonetheless. "I was already planning to have someone get a firsthand look at the farms. There are enough issues with the villages vis-à-vis the impending plague. This might be perfect."

"What kind of issues?" Maomao cocked her head. Jinshi had so many different problems to deal with, she didn't even know which one he meant.

Jinshi looked to Gaoshun, and the other man unrolled a map of I-sei Province on the table. It bore several circles in ink.

"What are these?" Maomao asked.

"The locations of the farming villages."

"There aren't as many as I expected, considering I-sei Province's size."

"There's a fair number of individual plots of farmland, but some sort of problem crops up when they reach a certain size. Outside of the western capital itself, the population here has never been very large, and with all the trade that goes on, many people simply import their food."

In this land, withered soil was the norm and water sources were limited. Maomao might only be able to go out to the nearest village.

Is that the same place Rikuson went?

He'd looked very busy—she doubted he'd been visiting the farms just to pass the time. He must've gone to the closest place.

"And these," Jinshi said, taking a brush Gaoshun offered him and drawing a larger circle on the map, "are grazing lands."

"Grazing lands, sir?" In other words, a place where livestock could feed. Probably not cows here in the western capital—goats and sheep, more likely.

"Some of them are used by the farmers, but some of them are areas that nomadic tribes pass through. Groups that don't have permanent settlements."

"I see."

Jinshi didn't seem to be explaining for Maomao's sake so much as he

was trying to organize his own thoughts. “Do you remember the orders I issued to try to combat the grasshoppers?” he asked.

“I do. You forbade the killing of pest birds, promoted the eating of insects, and said the farming villages should be taught how to make insecticide.” Maomao had been involved in the insecticide project herself. She’d developed several formulas that used primarily local ingredients.

“Right. Those orders went out all over Li, including I-sei Province, of course. However...” He trailed off.

Maomao thought she could see the miscalculation Jinshi had been confronted with. “Even if farmers do use insecticide, they only use it on their fields,” she said.

“Exactly.”

And I-sei Province had a few small fields and a lot of very big plains. The farmers wouldn’t kill the bugs in the grassy areas. Not to mention that there was every chance the nomads had never received the orders at all.

Even if they had... They wouldn’t want to put farm chemicals all over something their livestock were going to eat, and they wouldn’t go around killing grasshoppers one by one either.

Jinshi and Maomao were both silent.

The grasshoppers that had avoided extermination would produce a new generation many times larger than their own.

Maomao, though, was puzzled. “Pardon me, sir, but wasn’t there already a small-scale insect plague in western Li last year? Did that include the western capital?”

“No report of any plague came from I-sei Province,” Jinshi said, sounding equally perplexed. “Admittedly, this area survives largely by trade and doesn’t do much planting of its own, so any agricultural damage would be modest...”

“But there should have been *some*.”

She thought back to the previous autumn. Jinshi had sent her a crate of grasshoppers—it almost qualified as harassment—and she had measured hundreds of them. At the time, Lahan had speculated that they might have come from Hokuaren on the seasonal winds. And which area was closest to Hokuaren? I-sei Province.

Could the grasshoppers have missed them by pure luck? Or...are these people hiding something?

Maomao searched Jinshi’s face. He didn’t look overly concerned, but seemed calm, like he was simply confirming something he already knew.

Information he already had. She tried to look at the others in the room for a hint, but Suiren, Taomei, and Gaoshun betrayed nothing.

Is I-sei Province trying to hide a bad harvest? she wondered. Then she groaned to herself. *Maybe it's Empress Gyokuyou's brother.*

Gyoku-ou, the man who was now in charge in the western capital on behalf of their father. He seemed to have some sort of history with Empress Gyokuyou, but Maomao had largely ignored it as something that didn't involve a simple apothecary.

Did all this have something to do with why Rikuson had been out in the village, getting himself filthy?

Maomao started to feel impatient, restless. Thinking about the question only left her tying herself in knots, but she hated the feeling of leaving it unanswered. Best to move quickly, then.

"I know it's somewhat sudden, but perhaps you'd allow me to leave for the farming villages tomorrow, sir?"

"Much as I'd like you to get underway as soon as possible, that might be a bit too soon," Jinshi said. "Hmm..."

Gaoshun intervened at that moment. "Moon Prince," he said.

"What is it, Gaoshun?"

"If Xiaomao is to leave, best she wait a few days first."

"Why? So everything can be gotten ready?"

"No, sir. Because Basen should arrive a few days from now."

Maomao felt like she hadn't heard that name in a long time. Basen, she remembered, was traveling overland to reach the western capital.

"I think he would make an ideal bodyguard for Xiaomao," Gaoshun said.

"All right. We'll use that time to prepare," replied Jinshi, and with that, it was settled. Maomao let out a sigh of relief and was about to head back to the medical office where the quack and Tianyu waited, but Jinshi spoke again. "Just a moment."

"Yes, sir?"

"My *stomach* is bothering me. Perhaps you could examine it?" He grinned at her.

I might have known.

"I'll be waiting in the next room," he said. Then he left and, perhaps informed ahead of time, Suiren and the others stayed behind.

"Very well," Maomao said after a moment. She took out fresh bandages. Privately, though, she wished Basen would hurry up and get

here.

Chapter 4: Spring Comes to Basen (Part 1)

“Quack, quack!” said a voice.

Basen looked at the yellow-beaked, moist-eyed, fluffy-feathered white duck in front of him.

“I guess this is goodbye, duck.”

Basen had received several secret orders from the Moon Prince over the past several months. One of them concerned the likes of this domestic white duck. It was a classic bit of livestock: easy to raise, and it frequently laid eggs.

In fact, raising ducks had been the mission in question.

At first, Basen had thought the Moon Prince must be making fun of him. For all the flaws he might have, he hailed from a clan that had historically been charged with guarding the Imperial family—and now he was supposed to look after some waterfowl? He began to wonder if the Moon Prince had abandoned him.

Such, however, was not the case.

“The raising of livestock will save this country from much unhappiness, and I’m confident that you will pursue the duty diligently,” Basen had been told. If the Moon Prince was willing to give him such a vote of confidence, he could hardly decline. This had been near the end of last year.

Once he knew what his mission would be, he knew that the first thing he had to do was seek the advice of someone who knew more about raising ducks than he did.

Thus, early in the year, he’d found himself spending a great deal of time visiting one particular place...

To the northwest of the capital was a place called Red Plum Village. It was a haven for those who had left their homes and families in hope of becoming wayfarers. Wayfarers: usually that word evoked images of monks undergoing harsh training, but here things were a little different. Many here seemed to sincerely believe that their practice could make them

true immortals.

Raising animals was one facet of their practice. When Basen had first heard of it, he'd doubted his ears. "I thought monks and nuns were all vegetarians," he said.

"Immortals are long-lived unto endless life. A person can't live on vegetables alone" was the prompt and nonchalant answer. The place was run by an old man, as Basen had heard, and if you ignored the fact that his clothes were dirty and covered in feathers, you could see that in fact he had healthy skin and stood very straight. His life might or might not prove to be endless, but he was clearly experienced in how to be long-lived.

The old Basen might have argued the point, but he liked to think he had learned a thing or two over the past several years. He decided to consider the old man to be in the same category as that eccentric apothecary and left it at that.

It turned out he had the right idea. Training wayfarers was a pretense for Red Plum Village; in reality, it was a group of researchers. Much of their practice contravened the precepts normally observed by monks and nuns, but the research was so valuable that everyone above them seemed to turn a blind eye.

"Ducks can lay up to 150 eggs a year. They're omnivores, so they'll eat anything, and they can start laying eggs as early as six months after hatching. They're not so dissimilar to chickens, but if you intend to feed them grasshoppers, you'd be better off with ducks, I think—they're physically larger. If you feed them one single type of food from infancy, they'll come to eat that food exclusively, but that carries the risk of adversely impacting their growth, so I don't recommend it. The only possible problem with ducks is that they don't incubate their eggs as readily as chickens do, so..."

Basen wondered why people researching a particular field were always such windbags. Even that apothecary, Maomao, could be quite the talker when she warmed to her subject, and the bureaucrat Lahan was the same way.

Red Plum Village sprawled across a substantial area, much of which was devoted to agricultural fields. None of the "wayfarers" here wore the attire of religionists; they were all dressed to work outdoors. Their breath fogged as they worked in the fields.

"...and so as you can see, I'm terribly busy with my research, so I'm afraid I can't entertain your request," the old man said, finally winding

down to the end of his speech.

"I'm sorry. I don't quite follow," Basen said.

"I'm saying that *I* cannot teach you, but my disciple, whom I currently entrust with the work, can. You'll find her in that shed. Farewell."

"H-Hey, wait!"

The old man scampered away with a quickness that belied his age. Left with no choice, Basen went toward the shed, which was periodically emitting steam. "Excuse me?" he said. "I'd like to learn about duck-keeping..." The door barely seemed to be hanging on, and when he opened it, fetid air hit him in the face.

"Y-Yes, of course. *Laoshi* told me," came a nervous voice. Basen could see a small figure in the haze.

"I-It's you!" Basen exclaimed. The small figure was a young, plainly dressed woman. The fabric of her outfit wasn't even dyed, let alone embroidered, and her hair, held back with a simple piece of string, had no hair sticks or ornaments. Yet, even without a spot of rouge or whitening powder, she looked so much more full of life than she had the last time he had seen her. "Consort Lishu?"

"I... I'm not a consort anymore, M-Master Basen."

Standing before him was an ephemeral princess. A member of the U clan, who had twice entered the rear palace as consort of an emperor.

"What are *you* doing here?" Basen asked. He immediately wished he could have said something more thoughtful. His sister Maamei would have given him a piece of her mind if she knew.

Lishu had once been an upper consort, but she had been banished from the rear palace. True, she had been manipulated by the woman people called the White Lady, but that didn't change the fact that she had caused quite a commotion at court. Lishu had been obliged to retire from the world.

No one had told Basen so much as where she had gone or what she was doing; the Emperor said only that if he wished to see her, he should focus on doing great deeds. At a loss, Basen had recently made donations in cash and kind to several temples in hopes of making himself feel a little better —they hadn't even told him which temple she might have been hiding at.

He was so flabbergasted by this unexpected reunion that he could hardly think.

"W-Well, as you know, I was banished from the rear palace. I couldn't go back to my family, or to my last temple. His Majesty intervened on my

behalf so that I could come here to Red Plum Village," she said.

"Yes, but... Of all the places..."

Lishu's outfit was filthy in spots, smeared not just with mud but animal dung. Worst of all, there was no one in this shed but Basen and Lishu, and Basen agonized over whether it was appropriate for him to be alone with a young lady.

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“Have you no attendants? What happened to that lady-in-waiting who used to serve you?” Basen asked, shaken to see Lishu’s reduced circumstances—almost as shaken as he was to have Lishu right here in front of him.

“You mean Kanan? I released her from my service. She has her entire future ahead of her; she shouldn’t waste it here with me. I asked His Majesty to arrange a good match for her.” Lishu smiled and glanced down, her long eyelashes fluttering.

Basen clenched his fist. “Then you... You’re here alone?”

“You mustn’t worry. I have an old lady to look after me.”

“Just one?”

“Yes. I have no more need for heavy outfits or elaborate hair ornaments, after all.”

To Basen, Lishu’s words carried an air of self-recrimination—and yet, her expression was as clear as a cloudless sky. Basen had never been the best at guessing what a woman might have been thinking, and right now he had no idea what to say or do. Lishu was as retiring and as charming as ever, and appeared to be hard at work despite circumstances far beneath her station. Her slim fingers were caked with mud.

“This is no place for someone like you, Lady Lishu. I’ll talk to them, convince them to give you better work!” Basen said. It was the most helpful thing he could think of.

Lishu, however, shook her head. “N-No, thank you. I’m grateful for the thought, b-but these circumstances...”

“Yes? What about them?” Basen’s question was all but interrupted by quacking. He turned to find himself confronting several dozen ducks. “Gwuh?!”

The birds surrounded Basen, peering at him with their heads cocked in puzzlement. He couldn’t shake the sense that they were taking stock of him.

Then the ducks waddled over to Lishu, nuzzling up to her. She patted their wings. “A-At first, I was sure I couldn’t possibly raise ducks,” she told him. “But I’ve looked after these sweethearts since they hatched, and they think of me as their mother. *Laoshi* t-told me that’s just the way ducks are...”

When he heard the words *ducks*, *hatched*, and *Laoshi*, he finally realized Lishu was the disciple the old man had been talking about!

“Lady Lishu... You mean, you...?”

“Yes. I was told to teach you about hatching ducks.” Her stutter had vanished; perhaps she was more comfortable surrounded by the animals. “Ahem... Master Basen?” she said.

“Y-Yes? What is it?” he asked, unconsciously straightening up as if addressing one of his superiors.

Lishu glanced at him, then picked up a handful of her skirt. “I kn-know it’s a little late to be asking this, but how are your injuries?”

Basen had completely forgotten that the last time Lishu had seen him, he’d been one big pile of cuts, bruises, and broken bones.

“Oh, I’m used to getting a little injured. You don’t have to worry about me,” he said. Privately, he was overjoyed that she was concerned about him (even if that concern was only natural), but he was also a bit embarrassed. He realized Lishu had never exactly seen him at his best.

“But you suffered all that for my sake... And I never even got to thank you...”

“Lady Lishu...” Basen felt strange, simultaneously relaxed and anxious to be with this young woman. He shook his head: no, this wouldn’t do! He had business to attend to. “Well, Lady Lishu. If you would be so kind as to instruct me.”

“Y-Yes, of course,” she said, but she sounded almost disappointed.

There was a story passed down which related that long ago, when there had been a plague of locusts, the ducks had combated it by eating all the bugs. It was a legend, of course, not a serious model for policy, but at the same time, legends often contain a seed of truth. Ducks did eat insects. As omnivores, they frequently ate humans’ leftover food, but during plagues of locusts they could eat those too. A few even preferred eating bugs and sought them out.

Besides, having more livestock could only benefit the farmers. Therefore it had been decided that ducks would be distributed to the farming villages—but therein lay a problem.

How would they *get* these ducks that they were going to give out? Ducks were living things; one didn’t just snap one’s fingers and make more of them.

“Here, like this. The eggs should always be kept slightly warmer than human body temperature. You can’t just leave them lying there either; you have to turn them once in a while.” Lishu gently turned one of the eggs over in demonstration. It sat on a bed of straw, underneath which was soil

as soft as mulch. “The eggs won’t hatch if they get too hot or too cold, so Laoshi told me I should learn the temperature by touch alone.”

“By touch alone?”

“Y-Yes. Also, they need some humidity.”

“Humidity?”

It was sticky as summer in the shed, even though outside it was cold enough for one’s breath to fog. The shed was so full of steam it was almost hard to see.

“There’s a hot spring nearby, so w-we—we get our hot water there.” Lishu rolled back the rush mat on the shed floor to reveal a channel with water, no doubt quite hot, flowing through it. “If it gets too cold, we light a fire in the oven. We have to monitor the eggs constantly, so three of us work in shifts.”

It certainly did seem like too much for one person to handle alone. Even with two others to help, Basen worried that it must be all too much for Lishu, who had spent so much of her life as a sheltered princess.

“Are you sure you’re all right here, Lady Lishu?” he asked.

“A-All right how?”

“Well, a young woman of your station shouldn’t have to be *here*. You could be somewhere with ladies-in-waiting attending upon you. You may be a wayfarer, but that doesn’t change the fact that you are a princess of the U clan.”

The Emperor, Basen had heard, doted upon Lishu like his own daughter. And anyway, having been caught up in the White Lady’s schemes, she was really a victim herself. In his opinion, she deserved better than this.

“Master Basen...are you *worried* about me?”

“W-Worried?! No! It’s simply your right, milady...”

“O-Oh. N-No, of course. I shouldn’t have assumed you would be concerned about the likes of me...”

“That’s not what I meant at all!”

Basen cursed his mouth, which couldn’t seem to string two coherent words together. If the Moon Prince were here, he would have known what to say. Basen, however, could only look at the wall of the shed and feel miserable.

“Master Basen, a-are you quite all right?” Lishu peered at him with worry. No, no—Basen was the one who was worried.

“Lady Lishu...” he began. “You’ve suffered enough. You can go ahead

and live the life you want now."

Even Basen wasn't sure what he was saying. The life she wanted? What was that? Basen's life was duty to the Imperial family, protecting the Moon Prince. What he wanted didn't come into it. And he had the temerity to lecture Lishu about choosing her own life? The words sounded hollow in his ears.

"Master Basen..." Lishu seemed like she could hardly speak.

Of course not. She must have been too scandalized. Too deeply offended by the "advice" Basen dispensed so cavalierly. He resolved to learn what he had come here to learn as fast as he could and then go home.

"I... I don't know what I want yet. What I want has never mattered. I was never allowed to choose my own life."

"Then start now."

"I will. And what I want is to...to go on doing this for a while longer." She squatted down and turned another egg.

Her clothes were filthy, her hair plain, and she wore no makeup at all. Yet on her face was something Basen had never seen there before: a small smile.

Chapter 5: Spring Comes to Basen (Part 2)

He'd thought of the young woman as like a little flower, gossamer and delicate. He'd been afraid she might break if he touched her.

Now, as Basen rode along on his horse, he looked at the side of the road, where a small blue flower was blooming. He had always thought of flowers as things to be cherished and loved, but he saw now that they grew on their own, with or without anyone to dote upon them.

He turned toward the farming village, his breath white in the air. A wagon loaded with ducks in cages clattered along beside him. When the eggs had hatched, he had raised the ducklings until they were big enough, and now he would take them to the villages. How many times had he done this now?

"Distributing ducks is beneath you, sir," a soldier said.

This wasn't the first time one of his subordinates had objected to his going on these trips. They might even think it was a waste—as the Moon Prince had warned him they might. Basen was well aware of how they felt. "I've been given a job, and I'm going to do it. If you don't like this assignment, perhaps I can find you another one."

"N-No, sir," the soldier said, and neither he nor the others spoke up again—though they continued to share rueful looks. Even Basen, oblivious as he could be, could imagine what they said about him behind his back. He was the pampered second son of the Ma clan. The upstart from a branch family. Son of a eunuch. And more besides. Yes, his father Gaoshun came from a branch family of the clan—and to serve the Moon Prince, he had cast away the Ma name and spent nearly seven years pretending to be a eunuch.

Basen hated the idea of his father being belittled, but what would it gain him to mete out punishment here? The Ma clan were confidants of the Imperial family, and he would only be accused of abusing his position.

Basen had made the mistake of becoming emotional more than once before. On one occasion, an older soldier in his division had complained that he wasn't being treated as well as Basen and claimed the younger man

was being shown favoritism. Basen had lost his temper and fought the man in a “practice match” that was hardly less than a duel.

His opponent had ended up with three broken ribs and a broken right arm. Thankfully, none of the ribs had pierced a lung, and the arm had snapped cleanly and would heal. Nonetheless, the man had left the army. Perhaps he was humiliated by having been beaten by the younger, less experienced Basen—or perhaps he had simply never engaged in training fierce enough to break bones.

The Moon Prince was never less than committed, even when training. He could deflect Basen’s sword strokes with his blade. And Gaoshun, he would strike back mercilessly whenever he saw an opening in Basen’s guard. When Basen had been younger, even his older sister had been better at swordsmanship than him. He was physically strong, but never thought of himself as much of a swordsman. He had been good enough, though, to bring down that soldier, who had been very proud of his own strength.

He’d already known at that point that he had to be careful how much of his strength he used when dealing with women—but on that day he learned the same was true when he was facing men. He discovered his opponents were quite breakable. He never forgot the lesson: no matter what might be said to or of him, he must never be too eager to react with force.

“I can’t go around thrashing people...and I’d thrash them in a second,” he muttered to himself as he took a duck off the wagon and handed it to a farmer, along with a stern warning not to kill the animal. “We’re giving you these ducks as a pair. We’ll buy the eggs at a high price, and we recommend you breed more ducks too, but immediately killing them for food would be a mistake. You hear me?”

Some of these farmers already kept ducks, or had in the past, so thankfully Basen didn’t have to teach all of them how to raise the animals from scratch. He made sure they knew that the ducks would eat bugs and that this should be their primary diet, but also that if there weren’t enough of them, the ducks could eat leftovers, vegetable scraps, or even grass.

He could give the people all the warnings and advice he liked, but he had no way of knowing if they would listen. They might have thought he was something of a quack himself.

Just when he had made the rounds of the villages and thought he was done passing out animals, he heard a noisy quacking from the wagon. He discovered one young fledgling was still with him.

“Skwak!”

“You again, Jofu?” Basen gave the fledgling a look of annoyance. This particular bird had a black spot on her beak and seemed to think Basen was her mother, a profound mistake if there ever was one. Evidently this duck had hatched on the day of his reunion with Lishu, and Basen happened to be the first thing she saw. She followed him everywhere he went whenever he showed up at Red Plum Village, so he took to calling her Jofu, as if that were her name—although it really just meant “duck.”

Now he said to the duck, “You know what has to happen, right, Jofu? You’re going to go to some farm village, where you’ll be able to deal a crushing blow to those awful locusts! You can’t follow me around forever. Now’s your chance to build up the body a good soldier needs. Eat grains, eat grass, eat insects, and grow big!”

“Peep!” Jofu said and spread her wings. She almost appeared to be listening to him, but a duck is, well, a duck. Eventually, she would forget she had ever known Basen.

Or so he’d assumed. As he continued to take his young birds to the farming villages and then raise another group of chicks, Jofu was always with him, never staying behind in the villages. Basen and Jofu went out together and, inevitably, they came back together. More than once Basen tried to leave his fledgling in one of the farming villages, but each time Jofu would bite the farmers and climb onto the head of Basen’s horse, where she would flap her wings to be taken home. Jofu also got a beakful of the hands of several soldiers who tried to manhandle her. It got so bad that some soldiers began referring to the duck as respectfully as any senior officer.

Jofu’s feathers went from yellow to white, but the black spot on her beak remained, as did her tendency to savage strangers like a wild dog while following Basen around like a loyal one.

Today, too, Basen returned with Jofu riding on his shoulder. He would have to go to Red Plum Village to drop the bird off.

“That’s right...” Basen looked to the west, where the sun was setting, turning the sky red. The date had been set for the Moon Prince’s departure for the western capital. Basen’s next visit to Red Plum Village would most likely be his last. He would leave with another crop of ducks and distribute them to more villages on his own way west.

Word was that the westward expedition was likely to be a long one this time. A few months at least, the better part of a year more likely.

“Six months or more,” he mumbled with a sigh. He dismounted his horse as he passed through the gates of Red Plum Village. Being here always put him on edge. His heart raced despite the idyllic scenes of livestock roaming in the fields.

He told his subordinates to take care of the wagon, then headed for the duck shed. He seemed to walk quicker the closer he got.

He couldn’t help looking for Lishu, even though he knew she wasn’t always there when he came. Each time he saw her, so small and so delicate yet standing resolutely on her own two feet, he felt something very strange, a simultaneous rush of relief and anxiety.

And today? Would she be there today?

“M-Master Basen?”

His heart leaped. There was Lishu, in her plain clothes, holding a basket. Jofu jumped down off his shoulder and waddled toward the shed.

Basen pressed a hand to his chest and tried to order his pounding heart to be quiet. “Lady Lishu. I’d like to make my report to you, if I may.” He took out a map and circled the villages he had visited that day. With this, he had canvassed nearly all the frontier farm villages.

Red Plum Village wasn’t the only place raising ducks; there were others as well. The work would have to be able to go on after Basen left.

“It looks like you’ve taken them everywhere they could be needed. What will you do next?” Lishu asked, giving Basen a glance.

“Milady. I plan to take the next group with me and head west. I expect this will be my last visit here.”

Lishu blinked. “What?”

“My official duty is to serve as the Moon Prince’s bodyguard. He’s going to the western capital, so I must go with him.”

“He’s going again?”

The Moon Prince’s journey west had been made public at this point, but the news seemed not to have reached Lishu in her seclusion here. She knew of his first trip to the western capital, though, which had happened about this time last year, when she had still been a consort.

“I remember... That was where I first met you,” Basen said, although it pained him to imagine how he must have seemed to her at the time.

“Met me, and saved me—for the first time, but not the last.”

There had been a banquet at the western capital. A lion brought in for entertainment had attacked Lishu. Basen remembered her cowering under a table. Rumors called her a vile, shameless woman of no chastity, but all

he'd seen was a frightened, lonely girl the world had never treated well.

Basen worried how she would get by in the future. Her mother was dead, while her father had only ever seen her as a political pawn—and he had been stripped of his station at the same time Lishu had come to this village.

Would she be all right? That worry had plagued Basen ever since Lishu left the court. Meeting her here had only added to his fears.

"...with me?" He was so lost in thought that he almost didn't hear the words coming out of his own mouth.

"Wha?"

"Would you consider leaving Red Plum Village with me?" he repeated. Even he didn't know what he thought he was saying. His face was beet red, and he couldn't bring himself to look at Lishu.

Lishu, meanwhile, looked studiously at the ground. And was also blushing.

It must be his fault for having said something so outrageous. Might it be possible that time would turn back for him, just a few minutes?

Basen felt his breath grow ragged. "N-Never mind! It was nothing!"

"Nothing?" Lishu gave him a probing look, and the flush in her cheeks began to subside.

"A-Anyway, I have more reports to make! If you'll excuse me!"

With that, Basen left. He never did look at Lishu's face.

The moment Basen got home, he shut himself in his room and hung his head. "What am I doing?" he groaned, throwing himself across his desk and alternating between holding his head in his hands and tearing at his hair.

The door opened with a clatter. "What *are* you doing?"

"Sister?!"

It was Basen's older sister, Maamei. She was already married, but still living in the main Ma household. Her husband, Basen's brother-in-law, was of Ma blood himself, and, with Basen's father, was also responsible for His Majesty's safety. If it was decided that Basen was not suitable for the family headship, the position would most likely pass to his brother-in-law. Basen, in fact, was perfectly happy to be able to focus his full attention on guarding the Moon Prince, but he couldn't let that show.

At present, Basen's grandfather was the nominal head of the family, but in practice most of the work of running the clan was handled by

Basen's mother, Taomei. It was all rather complicated, but in essence the successor from the main household had been disinherited, and Gaoshun had been adopted into the main family from the branch house. Taomei had once been engaged to marry the disowned successor and was already well entrenched in the clan's day-to-day business, so she simply went on and married Basen's father. Hence why she was six years older than Gaoshun.

Taomei had then taught Maamei the basics of the clan's dealings, and Basen's older sister would presumably take Taomei's place someday. The Ma clan were the bodyguards of the Imperial family, meaning they could die at any time—so the clan took a pragmatic approach to succession. If Basen died, someone else would take his place.

As the Moon Prince's guard, Basen rarely returned home as such. The unorthodox assignment he'd been given recently, however, meant he saw much more of Maamei, which could be a little awkward.

"What brings you here?" he asked.

"Now, is that any way to speak to a *kind* older sister who just wants to see how her little brother is doing?"

Basen and Maamei seemed to have very different ideas of what it meant to be kind.

"On that subject, is it just me, or do you sort of...stink?" Maamei very deliberately pinched her nose. This was nothing new to Basen; she had always complained when he smelled sweaty, but these days he suspected it was something else.

"I think that would be the ducks," he said. Spend enough time with fowl and it was hard not to start smelling like them.

"Ducks? Ahh, yes, one of those anti-locust measures, yes? Do you think it will really help?"

"Sister, we're groping in the dark here. I'll thank you not to belittle our efforts."

"Goodness, pardon me," she said, although she didn't seem to feel very guilty. She started looking around Basen's room.

"Sister, if you don't need anything, then would you kindly get out?"

"Well! When did you get a tongue like that?" Maamei sat on the bed, evidently disinclined to listen to him. The bed was one of the few pieces of furniture in his chamber; he kept furnishings to a minimum because he trained here as well. "You could stand to have a little more...*stuff* in here," Maamei remarked.

"No. It would only get in the way."

“Hmm. Yes... This is a bachelor’s room if I ever saw one.” His sister’s words were always sharp as any sword.

“What’s a man’s love life got to do with his room?” Basen said with a scowl.

“Everything. Besides, you’re certainly the right age to be thinking about a wife. Don’t you have any good prospects?”

“S-Sister! You can’t just drop that subject on me!” He sprang up from his chair so fast it fell over.

“I might point out that, at least for the time being, you’re expected to become the next head of the clan. Our uncle raised the possibility that you should take a wife at least for form’s sake. There’s no telling when you might die, so it would be nice if you would leave a few children behind.”

“Ch-Ch-Children! But th-that would mean—”

“Ah, yes. Don’t worry, no one is expecting much from you. You know that’s why we had to push Baryou and Chue to pick up the slack. I’d like to see at least three more potential successors, but...maybe that’s asking too much. It’s really not a good look for you, though, sitting back and letting your relatives do all the work. You need a wife, even if only for show. Otherwise no one will take you seriously—that’s Uncle’s assessment.”

“I hear what you’re saying...” The subject made Basen’s head hurt. “You want me to hurry up and get married, don’t you? Just like the others.”

“Not at all!”

“What?” Basen looked at her, at a loss as to what else she could possibly mean.

“I think you’re like me. You couldn’t accept a partner who was chosen for you, the way Mother, Father, and Baryou could. What I’m saying is that *if* there’s someone you’re in love with, now would be the time to say so, before Uncle or someone decides for you.”

“In *l-l-love* with?!”

“I knew it! I’ll take that as a yes.” She gave him a very unpleasant smirk.

“I’m s-sorry, S-Sister, but I don’t know what you mean...”

“No, of course you don’t. You don’t have to say it; it’s written all over your face.”

Basen unconsciously put his hands to his cheeks and discovered they were warm.

Maamei stretched out on the bed. “I didn’t come here today just to tease you.”

Basen stayed silent. Maamei smirked even harder.

“As I said, neither Mother, nor Father, nor Baryou chose their own partners. There’s nothing wrong with that, but they happen to be the kind who can cope with whomever they end up with. Not me. I could never abide someone my parents or family picked for me. So I never gave them the chance—I decided for myself!”

Basen thought of Maamei’s husband: he was twelve years older than her. Basen remembered her saying she would marry him when she was only eight years old. Everyone had had a good chuckle, but eight years later, her pronouncement had come true.

Every time he met his brother-in-law, Basen felt like a failure.

Maamei pointed squarely at him. “You and I are the same. We could never consent to political marriages.”

“I-I’d like to think—”

“If you agreed to such a match, it would always remain a sham. Mother and Father gradually learned to love each other, and Baryou and Chue have found their places in their relationship, but you wouldn’t be able to do either of those things. Even if you could accept the situation, I tell you, your wife would never be happy.”

“I... I think...”

He found he couldn’t contradict her outright. He was sure that whomever his family might choose as his wife, she wouldn’t be a bad person. Likewise, he was confident that he would come to care for her.

In the back of his mind, though, there floated an image of a girl like a flower on the roadside.

“There. You just thought of someone, didn’t you?”

“I—I did not!” he exclaimed, flushing bright red. Maamei’s smile got wider.

“Not that it matters to me, but let me give you some *sisterly* advice. If there’s someone you have feelings for, you need to tell her. If she rejects you, so be it—at least you’ll know where you stand. I know you, and without that, you’d spend your entire life pining for her.”

Basen was silent: this, too, he could not deny.

“You might have nothing but brute strength to recommend you, you might be a damned fool who always goes charging in—but you’re still my little brother. Make your choice, and make it like you mean it.”

“You never said anything like that to Baryou...”

“Baryou has committed to his choices in his own way, you know.”

Basen didn’t really understand what that meant.

Maamei, looking like she felt lighter now that she had said what she came to say, got up from the bed. “I’ll be going, then.”

Basen’s mouth moved, but no words came out as his sister went to leave the room.

Then she turned. “Ah. One other thing I’d like to be sure of.”

“Yes? What?”

“She’s not married, is she?”

Basen froze in place but looked away. “No! Well... Not anymore!”

“*What?*” Maamei replied, with a theatricality that drove Basen up the wall.

The ducks surrounded Basen, quacking noisily. Jofu, still with the black spot on her beak, was there with him. Jofu was noticeably bigger than the other birds—she alone had remained with him as the other ducks had gone one by one to the farming villages.

Basen was wearing a brand-new outfit. Perhaps it would have been just as well to choose something well-worn, since it was only going to get dirty anyway, but new clothes were a chance to reset and refresh himself.

Jofu led Basen along, shaking her tail. She knew where he was going.

Steam rose from the hatchery, warmed as ever by the hot springs and the fire in the oven. By Basen’s request, they were hatching several times as many ducks as before.

Basen braced himself as someone emerged from the shed. He thought it might have been Lishu, but after a second he realized his mistake. It was one of the other wayfarers responsible for the hatchery, a middle-aged woman he’d met several times before.

“Master Basen! Everything is ready,” she said. She had cages, each quacking with a duck. “I was told this would be your last visit. I do hope you’ll take good care of these sweeties.” She bowed deeply to him. Some of the wayfarers were just researchers, but others treated the ducks like their own children. Basen had faith that a nun who felt love even for waterfowl would never mistreat Lishu.

With all respect and apologies to the nun, however, there was just one thing on Basen’s mind: disappointment. He’d told Lishu his next visit would be his last, but he hadn’t said when he would be coming. Anyway,

she wasn't under any obligation to match his schedule.

He clenched his fists. Despondent at his own ineptitude, he took the cages and put them on the wagon. The driver of the wagon pitched in, and the three of them loaded the cages. Jofu had wandered off, evidently tired of the scene.

"I must apologize to you for being on duty today," the nun said.

"I-I'm sure I don't know what you mean, ma'am!" Basen said.

"Hee hee! I'm sure you would much rather be passing the time with a sweet young thing like Lishu than a ripe old auntie like me. Although it can be tricky to hold a conversation with that girl—she's not the world's best talker."

"H-Heavens!"

"You know, you sound a lot like her." The nun laughed out loud, but there was a refinement to it; it spoke to the upbringing she must have had before she became a wayfarer. "Lishu is, well, timid. If I were a bit younger, it's the sort of thing that might have annoyed me."

"What?"

"Now all I feel is sympathy—she reminds me of myself when I was her age!" The nun patted the ducks in the cages. "No one gives her any trouble, of course. Other than a few strange ones who like this kind of lifestyle, most of us who come to Red Plum Village have our stories. I left the profane world more than twenty years ago now, so I have no idea who or what Lishu might be. And no interest in finding out. I just wish she would stop tripping and breaking the eggs!" The nun put a cage on the wagon. "There, that's the last one. Where are these ducks going to end up, I wonder?"

"We're going west," Basen said. He would head overland toward the western capital, distributing the ducks as he went.

"Well, have a safe trip," the nun said to the birds. "Eat lots of bugs, lay plenty of good eggs, and live as long as you can."

The ducks quacked at the nun almost as if in response. She knew that if they couldn't make themselves useful, they would be turned into dinner. Basen couldn't ask the farmers to raise pets.

Basen found himself wondering who this woman was and why she had come to Red Plum Village, but he didn't ask. He could only assume she, too, had a story of her own.

"Quack!" Jofu quacked, pecking at Basen's toes.

"What is it? Where have you been?" Basen asked. In response, the

duck grabbed a beakful of his robe and pulled.

"Looks like she wants to take you somewhere. Why not go see where? I'll handle the rest here."

"Are you sure?" Basen glanced at the driver, who nodded.

Jofu loped ahead of Basen, flapping her wings and looking back occasionally to make sure he was still following. Ducks were evidently smarter than he had given them credit for.

Jofu led him to a small lake, a place edged with green among the otherwise desolate scenery. A young woman in white sat by the lakeside.

"Lady Lishu?" Basen said, and the young woman looked up. She was holding a blade of young grass.

"Master Basen!" Lishu was so surprised to see him that she dropped the grass. Jofu promptly started pecking at it—it seemed to be a favorite duck snack. "Is today your last visit, then?"

Confronted with Lishu, whom he had given up hope of seeing, Basen froze. He was overjoyed to see her, but he had no idea how to talk to her. And after all the practice he had done last night!

"Lady Lishu!" he said.

"Yes?"

"W-Wonderful weather we're having, isn't it!"

"Er, i-it is?" Lishu looked confused. The sky was cloudy, and though it wasn't raining, neither was it sunny and cheerful.

Lishu was no more sure what to say than Basen. For a moment, silence reigned between them. Jofu stood smack between the two and looked from one to the other.

"U-Um!" By coincidence, they spoke at the exact same time.

"G-Go ahead, Lady Lishu."

"Wha? No, please speak first, Master Basen."

Once again neither of them said anything. The situation remained at an impasse, although Jofu continued to peck at the grass.

Basen balled up his fists, gritted his teeth, furrowed his brow, and finally managed to open his mouth. "Lady Lishu. Would you do me the honor of coming to the western capital with me?"

His clothes, the ones he'd picked out fresh, were filthy from loading ducks onto the wagon. He had nothing in his hands to offer—not a fancy accessory, not even a flower. Maamei hadn't demanded to know who exactly he had feelings for—but if she had seen him like this, she would never have let him live it down. Still, for this one act, she would have had

praise.

Basen would ask the Emperor and the Moon Prince. He knew the Emperor was concerned about Lishu. He would go to him, spirit earnest, head bowed.

Basen's heart was pounding in his chest. His breath was harsh, fogging in the air in front of him. He could barely bring himself to look at Lishu for fear of how she might have been regarding him. When he did, though, he found her red-faced and biting her lip. She held up her skirts with grass-stained fingers.

"Lady Lishu?" he said.

"Master Basen..." Lishu finally managed to open her mouth, but her eyes brimmed with tears and she sniffled as she spoke. "I... I c-c-can't go with you!"

"What do you mean, you can't?" Basen asked, trying hard not to let his face fall. He'd been well aware that she might turn him down. He'd practically been begging for it, springing that question on her like he had.

Lishu was trying as hard as he was to hide her emotions, and meeting with the same mixed success. Tears gathered in her eyes, and her mouth was tight. She was clenching her fists so hard her nails bit into her palms.

Maamei had told him to tell her. To make clear how he felt. Maybe that had been a mistake. Basen's actions had only brought Lishu more pain.

"Lady Lishu, please just—"

He was about to say *forget what I said*, but she burst out:

"I w-wish I could! I wish I could go with you!" She looked him square in the face, just managing to hold back her tears. "B-But now, I know all too well. I'm a foolish girl who knows nothing of the world, and someone will try to use me no matter where I go. I know they were trying to keep me safe by sending me here to Red Plum Village."

Basen knew it was true: all the inhabitants of Red Plum Village were eccentrics loosed from the fetters of the secular world. Many of them weren't even that interested in other people, so they wouldn't torment Lishu, or try to use her for their own ends as her father had.

"If I were to go with you to the western capital, Master Basen, I would only be a burden to you."

"Lady Lishu, no..."

"Do your duty for Ji—I mean, the Moon Prince, Master Basen. I'd only be baggage. I've come to have some idea of how people see me." The tears continued to gather in Lishu's eyes as she looked up at Basen, but they

didn’t fall. She blinked furiously, holding them back. “What you said when you caught me—it gave me the strength to go on. To this day, it holds me up.”

Jofu nuzzled Lishu’s feet, worried about her. Lishu patted the duck on the head. She looked down, and then when she looked up again there were no more tears in her eyes.

“I am not just a tool. I want to learn to think for myself and choose my own path.”

Basen thought he caught the hint of a spark in Lishu’s eyes. It was still weak and dim, but he saw the determination to make it burn brighter.

“I know there are many people who care for me. Kanan and my lady-in-waiting, His Majesty and Lady Ah-Duo. The Moon Prince. And you, Master Basen. Along with many others. But I’ve been so caught up in my own misfortune that I’ve never so much as thanked you.”

Lishu was as delicate and ephemeral as a flower. How could she be expected to worry about anyone but herself?

“You can’t blame yourself for that. Anyone in your position would have done the same...”

“Don’t baby me. Please. I’ve been doing a lot of thinking, such as I can, and this is my choice. If I told myself that I couldn’t have done differently, that anyone would have done the same thing—wouldn’t that be a slap in your face as well, Master Basen?”

Basen’s breath caught in his throat. Guarding the Imperial family meant putting his life on the line—not something he could readily do while also trying to keep Lishu safe.

“I can’t go to the western capital,” Lishu said, giving Jofu a pat on the head. “But...maybe, once I’ve gained a little more confidence in myself...” Here she glanced away from him again. “Maybe you could come back to Red Plum Village?”

Her face was red. She looked like there was more she wanted to say, but nothing came.

Basen was blushing as hard as she was; his mouth hung open, but he couldn’t seem to say anything either. As what Lishu was saying dawned on him, he felt the blood run hot with excitement. “A-Absolutely!” he said.

Without quite meaning to, he pitched forward; Jofu squawked and scrambled out of the way.

“When I see you again, I promise I’ll be a more worthy man. You said you would only be extra weight, but I can easily lift one or two hundred

kin! If you still worry that won't be enough, I'll keep working until I can lift two—no, three times that much!"

He would work so that Lishu need never fear that she was merely "baggage." So that she would know he wouldn't stagger no matter how hard she leaned against him.

The surface of the lake rippled softly, catching the light. Jofu pecked at the grass along the bank, where there were small buds amid the stalks.

Spring would be here soon, but winter's chill had not yet departed. Lishu was in her own winter now. But though she be trampled, though she be picked, though she be pecked at, she was trying to put forth a beautiful blossom. It was not for Basen to interfere. He would simply wait, anticipating the spring day when that flower would bloom.

He would do what he had to do until the day he could go to that flower.

"I'm going to the western capital, but I'll be back. I'll protect the Moon Prince, help protect this nation, and I will protect you. I'll grow into a man who can support anyone and anything who needs him."

Lishu smiled. "I know you will. I only pray for your success and safety."

Was it just him, or was there an aroma of flowers in the air? Strange; none of the buds among the grass seemed to be open yet.

There was only Lishu, with a smile on her face that looked like the first hint of spring.

Chapter 6: The Farm Village (Part 1)

Basen arrived in the western capital three days after Maomao and the others. She waited by the entrance to the annex, feeling it would be polite to at least say hello to him.

When he appeared, however, she burst out, "*What* is that?" So much for the friendly greeting.

"What? This is Jofu."

"Jofu. As in 'duck'? I can see that. And it looks delicious."

Basen was covered in sand and dust, and perched on his shoulder, for reasons unknown, was a duck. A perfectly ordinary domestic duck, with white feathers and a yellow bill. The only distinctive thing about it was a single black spot on its beak.

"Oh-ho! A lovely gift you've brought me, I see! Sit back, dear younger brother-in-law, and let your sister handle dinner!" Chue was ready to grab the bird right off his shoulder.

"This duck isn't for food!" Basen said, stopping her in her tracks.

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Oh yeah, they're in-laws, aren't they? Maomao thought. She got the impression Chue teased Basen a lot.

"If it's not food, then what is it? Your pet?" Chue asked.

The duck did seem noticeably attached to Basen—it held on to his head with its wings and preened his hair.

"I've been hatching ducks and distributing them to farming villages on the Moon Prince's orders. I was going to leave Jofu in one of the villages, but she's taken too much of a liking to me and won't leave."

"Oh, I see," said Chue. Seeing as Basen had given the duck a name, he was evidently taken with her as well. The duck, demonstrating her native intelligence, hopped down off Basen's shoulder and pooped on the ground. Smart.

"I have to go see the Moon Prince. Is there anyone who could take care of Jofu for me?"

"Ooh! I will!" Chue said, sticking her hand in the air.

"Is there anyone else?"

"Not sure I'd be much better," Maomao said. She was already drooling. *I remember the duck En'en prepared back at Lahan's place. Boy, that was good.* She didn't trust herself not to be bested by her own appetite. *Maybe we could get the quack to take care of her?*

No, no, there was someone even more appropriate.

"I know a farmer who would be perfect. I'll ask him," she said.

"A farmer? Wait, you have acquaintances in the western capital?"

"No, he was sent here from the central region."

Basen remained puzzled, but there wasn't much more Maomao could say. It was the truth. In any case, they could entrust the duck to Lahan's Brother.

Basen had been in the western capital two full days when Maomao finally got permission to tour a farming village.

"You could take your time, young lady. We've plenty of medicine still. No need to go rushing off to the fringes of a place we hardly know yet," said the quack doctor, who took her excuse entirely at face value. There had to be some reason, after all, for a court lady serving as a medical assistant to leave her post and go on an inspection tour.

"It's all right, sir. Who knows? I might even find some unknown drug."

That much was true. I-sei Province was home to different flora and fauna than Kaou. There was no telling what plants or animals she might

encounter, and what their potential medicinal properties might be. Maomao was actually a bit excited—she hoped she could find interesting medicines.

She brought the absolute minimum of belongings, only what she could fit into a bag. She asked that some gold nuggets or silver chunks be prepared for her in case she needed cash on hand for anything—unprocessed precious metals would be the most versatile and effective forms of payment in I-sei Province, which did so much trade with other nations.

"Huh. Do they normally send court ladies on jobs like this?" asked Tianyu with a skeptical look.

"I guess not? But I was hired more as an apothecary than a physician, so it was always possible they would send me on this kind of errand."

In order to come up with a pesticide.

"Huh. An apothecary. Here I thought it was pure nepotism that got you where you are, Niangniang." Tianyu sure did know how to needle a person.

"Oh, come now, don't be like that. You mustn't be so suspicious, my boy."

Oh, my poor quack. You're the one who needs to be more suspicious.

Few were the people in the world uninvolved enough that it wasn't worth asking questions about them.

"If you say so, mister. Have a good time, Niangniang." That appeared to be all Tianyu meant to contribute to the conversation, because he flopped over on one of the patient cots and waved over his shoulder.

The quack gave Maomao a package of snacks and waved too. "See you soon!"

"Don't worry, I'll keep an eye on things while you're away!" Lihaku said. Yes, with him there, at least she wouldn't have to worry about the quack doctor.

"Took you long enough."

"She's right on time!"

Basen and Chue were waiting for her at the entrance to the annex. Maomao had been told to wait until Basen arrived in the western capital so that he could go with her as her bodyguard and Lihaku could stay here.

Maomao looked around. *Isn't there supposed to be someone else?* "Er, is this it? I thought we were supposed to be bringing seed potatoes." Along

with Lahan's Brother, for that matter, but she only saw a couple of horses. "Where's the wagon with the potatoes?"

Chue stuck her hand in the air. "I'll field this one! The seed potatoes *are* going by wagon, but the wagon is so much slower that we gave them a head start! It was the other guy's idea—the guy driving the wagon. I don't know how to describe him. Not very memorable. And as for why I'm here, it's because you're already such a dear friend of mine, Miss Maomao! Miss Chue begged to go along with you, or she would spend all her time worrying how you were doing in lands unknown!"

"What I'm hearing is, it sounded like fun so you decided to tag along."

The unmemorable wagon driver had to be Lahan's Brother. Maomao realized Chue hadn't officially met him yet.

Rather than actually saying Maomao was right, Chue produced a string of small flags.

"And what takes you on a tour of the farming villages, Master Basen?" Maomao asked, just to be polite.

"The Moon Prince's orders. He told me to guard you with my life. He doesn't want Master Lakan going on a rampage in the western capital."

There was nothing Maomao could say to that. She especially couldn't say that she thought Lihaku might have been a better choice for the job.

It sounded like Basen had some idea of her connection to the old fart, but since he still treated her just the same way he always had, she decided to let it go.

Seems like practically everyone I meet these days knows. She was discovering that everyone around her seemed aware of something she herself would rather not admit. The freak strategist's behavior couldn't be swept under the rug here.

But what can I do? We're not related, so.

Maomao decided now was no time to rethink her attitude.

"My father is here as the Moon Prince's guard. I'm sure it'll be fine," Basen said, although he sounded like he was mostly trying to convince himself. He might have been starting to wonder why Jinshi seemed to be keeping him at arm's length recently.

I hope he's not getting frustrated, Maomao thought. She'd been concerned about Basen's psychological state, but he appeared surprisingly stable. Slightly calmer and more mature than before, in fact.

"Is it just me, little brother, or have you turned over a new leaf?" Chue said, nudging him. She seemed to share Maomao's intuition.

“Wh-What? Why would you ask that?”

In any case, it was true that Gaoshun was here to serve as Jinshi’s bodyguard. Jinshi might well have some enemies in the western capital, but they weren’t actually likely to try to lay a hand on him.

If someone important is assassinated in the middle of a long journey, it’s the local ruler who has to face the music.

Maomao didn’t know much about Gyoku-ou, but she’d like to think that he wouldn’t allow his most important visitor to find himself in danger.

Chue grinned, then climbed onto her horse and put her feet in the stirrups. She was wearing not a skirt, but a pair of trousers.

“All right. The village is about forty kilometers from here. We should reach it in four hours or so,” Basen said.

“Sounds like we’ll still catch that wagon! How about we take a little detour?” Chue suggested.

“Unfortunately, this isn’t the capital, and there aren’t many tea houses around. You’re welcome to share some grass with your horse if you want,” Basen said, unruffled by Chue’s tweak.

She is his older brother’s wife, as far as it goes. Basen seemed to be showing her a certain measure of respect, although Chue treated him the same way she seemed to treat everyone.

“Which would you like to ride, Miss Maomao?” Chue asked.

“I’m not sure I have a good answer to that.”

There were two horses, and Maomao didn’t know how to ride by herself, so she would have to ride with one of the others. It didn’t really matter to her who.

“Okay, you can be behind Miss Chue, then! Mister Basen’s saddle is hard—tough on the bum! Miss Chue’s saddle is nicely tanned, highly shock-absorbent, and easy to sit in for long hours on the trail! Tell me, which would you like better?”

Needless to say, Maomao pointed at Chue.

“Just a second, where did you get such a nice saddle? I thought we were borrowing these horses.”

“Yes, but the Moon Prince is a very thoughtful man. He does good work, every once in a while.”

“And just what do you mean by that?” Basen snapped, displeased by this backhanded compliment. At least in that way, he was still Basen.

“What do I mean? The moment the Moon Prince said he was assigning you to guard duty, I said that then shouldn’t there be another woman to

chaperone, and he looked like he had seen the light! Don't you worry, Miss Maomao, the ever-thoughtful Miss Chue has your back. Your spirit may be stouter than a stern log, but your body is so delicate you would probably die if someone punched you. Miss Chue knew you couldn't be trusted to Basen by himself—he doesn't know his own strength! You should be grateful to me."

I probably would *die if someone punched me.*

Maomao was not exactly the brawny type. She could endure poisons of all kinds, but physical assault would quickly prove her undoing.

"You should be grateful too, little brother. You can call me Miss Chue—or Honored Elder Sister, if you prefer."

"Hngh..." Basen was never going to outtalk Chue. He could only hang his head.

With the winner of the conversation decided, the three set off.

There was nothing particularly remarkable about the journey. From the city they headed west across empty plains, sticking to a strip of bare earth that seemed to pass for a road. Once or twice they crossed paths with caravans coming the other way. Sometimes they saw tents belonging to nomads, the families' children tending the goats or sheep.

Is that the horizon? Maomao wondered. Her old man, Luomen, had explained that there was a theory that the world was a sphere, and that this was evidenced by the fact that on open land, you could see a slight curvature along the horizon in the far distance. Maomao thought she did indeed see a bend.

She didn't know for sure whether it was true that the world was round, but if so, it would explain why the stars moved. Or anyway, so Luomen had said. Now she wished she had paid more attention, but unfortunately, most of his explanation hadn't stuck with her. She realized with chagrin that it must've been one of the things he had learned while studying in a foreign land, and here she had ignored it.

It was surprisingly cold on the plains, though it was spring. There was plenty of sunshine, but also a wind that sapped the body's heat. What was more, the air was so dry—and a bit thin. They were high above sea level.

"Here you go, Miss Maomao," Chue said, passing her a cloak. It was made of wool that blocked the wind and was worked with embroidery so fine that it would have looked distinguished even in the capital.

Chue was wearing a cloak too. It looked equally warm, but was somewhat plainer than the one she had given Maomao—oddly subdued for

Chue, who normally liked to be the center of attention.

Basen's cloak was simple but practical. He also, notably, wore gloves to keep his hands warm on the reins.

Pressed up against Chue and with the cloak on her back, Maomao was able to stay warm, but the wind and the sun still got at every part of her that was exposed.

Wish I had some of my sisters' balms right now. Between the strong sun and dry air, she was concerned about tanning. She'd applied a sun-blocking ointment, but what about Chue? Her skin was darker than Maomao's but appeared perfectly healthy.

"Miss Chue, I have something to prevent tanning. You want some? It'll keep your skin from drying out too." It was worth asking, she figured. If she ran out, she could just make more with the components they had at the western capital.

"Ooh, can I? Miss Chue has always been a little darker, so tans don't stand out so much, but she'd be happy to try it!"

"Sure. I'll give you some when we take a break."

Basen had informed them that there was nowhere along the road for any pleasant diversions, but they would have to rest the horses at some point. There was plenty of grass everywhere for the animals to eat, but if they could stop somewhere there was water, so much the better. And just at that moment, a river came into sight.

"We'll take a short break there," Basen called.

"Yeppers!" said Chue.

"All right," said Maomao.

When they reached the water, Maomao found it wasn't so much a river as a very large puddle. The water was shallow and there was no current. It had probably been formed by a rainstorm, and would soon be dry again.

There were trees growing nearby, shading large rocks with patterns carved into them. Signposts to here, there, and everywhere, Maomao surmised.

She gazed at the trees growing around the watering hole. *Are those pomegranate trees?* The leaves looked like it, somehow. A few of the branches bobbed gently. Maybe there were birds perching in them. She could see some at the water, along with a group of wild horses getting a drink.

"There might be snakes around," Chue said.

"Ooh, you think?"

Maomao and Chue looked, but they didn't find any. There was a hole in the ground that looked like a den, but when they dug at it a rat came out. They'd brought provisions, so they let the rodent get away.

Tall grass grew by the water's edge. Maomao knew from her research that beefwood and licorice were endemic to this area, but she didn't see any. Not that she would have expected to find significant quantities in one place.

I guess it was a lot to hope for.

She did, however, find some grass with a unique scent. It was taller than your average grass but not as tall as a tree, and looked like mugwort. If its medicinal properties were anything like mugwort's, it might be useful in exterminating insects. Maomao took a sample in hopes of finding out, and collected a few other intriguing plants as well.

Chue clapped her hands and called, "Miss Maomao! Lunch is ready!"

Maomao and her companions sat on a blanket, eating meat and pickled vegetables sandwiched between pieces of bread. Maomao found she had sweated profusely despite only riding along; her body was ravenous for water and salt. It made the pickled vegetables taste very good indeed.

No sooner had he finished eating than Basen started studying a map. He took a floating compass out of his bag and floated it in the water. Maomao and Chue watched him.

Maomao asked the obvious question. "What good is a map out on the open plains?"

"It's better than nothing, but you're right that there aren't a lot of landmarks out here," Chue commented. "Between the compass and the position of the sun, I think it looks like we should edge north a little bit. As long as there's nothing to block the view, we should be able to see houses—that'll be our destination." She might sound flippant, but she was surprisingly capable. Evidently, she could even do land navigation. Basen looked away, seeming to feel a little awkward.

"May I ask something else?" said Maomao.

"Anything you like, Miss Maomao."

"Why don't we have a local guide?"

Frankly, she wished she had asked sooner. She'd figured they were just going to a nearby village—they weren't leaving Li or anything—and that a guide wouldn't be necessary, but this was turning into a more elaborate trip than she had expected. A long journey was never precisely safe, even within national borders. It was best to have someone who knew the

territory inside and out.

"Funny you should ask that," Chue said, glancing around. Basen was looking too, his gaze hard. His hand was on the hilt of his sword and he was obviously ready to leap into battle.

I don't like where this is going.

Chue stood in front of Maomao. "Okay! Just stay right there, Miss Maomao; don't move an inch."

Maomao discovered that they were surrounded by strange men; she almost hadn't seen them emerge. They were scruffy-looking types who spoke Linese with a strong accent. As for what they said, it was your standard threats, make-with-the-cash demands, and so on. And of course, they wanted to be left with the women.

These were bandits if Maomao had ever seen them.

Wonder if I have any particular value as a woman. Neither Maomao nor Chue was especially attractive; she doubted they would fetch much of a price if the bandits tried to sell them. It wasn't a particularly happy thought, and her heart was starting to race. She took a few slow, deep breaths to try to calm herself.

"Miss Maomao, feel free to close your eyes. If they try anything, Miss Chue will use her married-woman appeal to get us out of it!"

She seemed very confident. In fact, she seemed to be looking down her low-set nose at them.

Maomao, however, wasn't eager to close her eyes. She reached into her bag and found a sewing needle and some bug repellent. They wouldn't be enough to do any serious damage, but they might set their attackers back on their heels for a moment.

As it happened, though, they didn't need Chue's allure or Maomao's sewing needle.

There was an audible *crack*, and then Bandit No. 1 went flying clean past Maomao.

There was a noticeable *crunch*, and Bandit No. 2 collapsed to the ground, holding his arm and writhing.

There was a distinct *snap*, and Bandit No. 3 went down, spitting a mix of saliva, blood, and teeth.

There was no restraint. A fight in a stage play would have lasted longer. Frankly, it almost felt like too little to describe.

Basen had reached for his sword—but that didn't mean he was going to use it.

He took them all out bare-handed! thought Maomao, flabbergasted. She took several more breaths, then came back to herself and rushed over to Basen. “Let me see your hand!”

“Er, yeah...”

Basen, looking a little surprised, slipped off his glove and held out his hand. The fingers didn’t look broken, and the wrist seemed intact. In addition to being preternaturally strong, Basen, so Maomao had heard, was less susceptible to pain than most people. It meant he could sometimes injure himself with his displays of strength.

I don’t understand it.

After all those terrible noises, she would have expected the person administering the beatings to at least have hurt their hand. There had to be some reason Basen was completely unharmed.

She took his glove and soon discovered the explanation. Outwardly it was made of wool and looked quite soft, but it felt heavy. There was some kind of metal inside. Basen’s brute strength combined with a weighted glove? It was almost enough to make her feel sorry for the bandits.

Speaking of the bandits, Chue was flitting from one to the next, tying them up. Then she tied the three of them together before she put up her feet and wiped the sweat from her brow with a sigh.

“What are we going to do with them?” Maomao asked.

Her question was innocent, but Chue replied, “What are we supposed to do with them? We can’t take them with us. We’ll leave them here. When we get to the village, we can ask someone to come get them.” She didn’t look like she cared very much.

“I don’t like this, though,” Basen said, folding his arms and furrowing his brow.

“I know what you mean,” Maomao said, for once finding herself feeling the same way he did. What if the men were eaten by a wolf or something while the travelers were on their way to the village? It was hardly outside the realm of possibility.

I don’t think I’d sleep well knowing I’d been a part of that, even if they are crooks.

Basen walked over to the bandits and took one of them by the arm. Then there came another unpleasant *crack.*

Oof...

Apparently what Basen hadn’t liked was the possibility that the bandits might escape. A couple of them wet themselves as he mercilessly snapped

each of their arms. He'd presumably chosen their arms and not their legs so that they could walk when they were being taken to prison.

Never realized I was the nice one, Maomao thought. She looked at the bandits and mentally urged them to give up their life of crime.

Their journey was quiet after that.

I thought there might be more bugs. Oh well.

There were a few; they were traveling across the plains, after all. It was hardly a swarm, though; she just spotted a grasshopper popping through the grass now and then.

Maybe we didn't have to worry about a plague after all? If there weren't tons of grasshoppers in the western capital, well, nothing could be better.

About the time they reached the next resting point, they caught up with Lahan's Brother and his potatoes. For reasons Maomao couldn't guess, there was a duck atop the horse pulling the wagon, quacking out orders.

"Jofu! You're here too?"

"Quack!"

The moment the duck saw Basen, she flapped down off the horse's head. Her eyes seemed to sparkle, and Maomao would have sworn she saw a blizzard of flower petals behind her.

"I tried to leave her at the mansion, but she insisted on coming with," Lahan's Brother said. Maomao was the one who had originally foisted the duck on him, so she couldn't really complain.

"I have to admit, I've grown quite fond of her," Lahan's Brother said, clearly smitten. "She's very intelligent—and very helpful. She gladly eats bugs."

"Sounds like you had a nice, quiet trip," Maomao said. *Some* people obviously hadn't encountered any bandits.

"What? You've always been peevish, but now you're downright prickly."

She took exception to Lahan's Brother's tone, but nonetheless she decided to indulge him with an explanation of what had happened. "We were attacked by bandits."

"They really have those out here?" Lahan's Brother asked, the blood draining from his face.

Ahh! Now that's how a normal person would react. As she savored Lahan's Brother's response she looked at Chue, who had been

unconcerned by the attack. Chue seemed downright used to being threatened by criminals, or at the very least unsurprised. Like this was all somehow part of the plan.

Lahan's Brother's party consisted of one wagon full of cargo, Lahan's Brother himself, two sturdy-looking soldiers for guards, three farmers probably there to help, as well as two local guides. And one duck.

Maomao was no logistician, but two guides seemed like one more than they needed. *Maybe one of them was supposed to be with us?* Come to think of it, Chue had dodged her question about having a local guide.

They set off again after this second break. It turned out the village was very close. Modest houses were arranged on either side of a river, the surrounding area peppered with trees and farm fields. There was a gently sloping mountain behind the village, but unlike the mountains Maomao knew, it looked as if the grassy plain had simply risen up into a hill. The little white spots she saw were probably sheep. The black ones, maybe oxen. Judging by the number of houses, there couldn't be more than three hundred people in this village.

As they approached, they were greeted by lowing oxen. Some of the sheep were still fluffy, while others were recently shorn. It was right in the middle of shearing season. The village children, no strangers to physical labor it seemed, were collecting sheep patties into baskets.

"What's that about?" Basen asked, giving the kids a funny look. Maomao felt they could ask him the very same question, considering he had a duck on his head.

"They use the sheep dung for fuel, I believe. And if you tuck it under your bed, it's supposed to keep you warm," she explained.

"Under your bed?!"

"Sure! You didn't know? Silly little brother," Chue drawled, not missing an opportunity to give him grief. "Little brother" seemed to be her default name for him when she was tweaking him.

The village was surrounded by a moat and a brick wall. Maybe the bandits didn't constrain themselves to attacking travelers.

Basen talked to someone at the entrance, and they were quickly allowed in—maybe a messenger had preceded them. The duck hopped off his head and trotted behind him.

An important-looking person Maomao took to be the village headman came out to greet them.

"Oh! Excuse meee!" Before Basen could say anything to him, Chue

started chatting volubly with the headman. The headman's eyes glinted, and he shouted to one of the guides. Chue was smiling broadly about something, while the guide grew paler and paler.

It was impossible to miss the charge in the air. One of the soldier-guards from Lahan's Brother's group stood ready behind Chue. She was still smiling and the guide still seemed calm, but it was obvious that the man was being taken away.

Ahh, now I get it. Maomao crossed her arms and watched them lead the guide off somewhere.

"Hey, what's going on?" asked Lahan's Brother, ever the straight man.

"I suspect they want to ask him for a discount. He promised us a safe route, and yet we got attacked by bandits."

"Okay, but is it really fair to take it out on him?"

"Fair question, but it sounds like this was the guide's special road. Guaranteed to be perfectly safe. They even paid extra to learn about it."

"That's silly. There's nothing but grass in every direction. It's not the guide's fault they let him dupe them."

He was right about that. Maomao was making it all up, in fact, saying whatever came to mind. Talk of bandits was too stimulating for Lahan's Brother, so she changed the subject. While they talked, Basen went up to the headman. His duck, like a faithful dog, followed behind him.

After the two conversed for a while, Basen came over to Maomao. "The headman is going to show us somewhere we can stay tonight."

"All right."

"I appreciate your help," Lahan's Brother said politely to Basen. He was the son of a distinguished household, no matter how it might seem, and he'd been raised with proper manners. If Lakan hadn't betrayed his own family, Lahan's Brother might have been a soldier himself by now.

"Of course. By the way..." Basen looked at Lahan's Brother. "What should I call you?"

Basen didn't know Lahan's Brother's name either.

"Hoh!" Lahan's Brother's eyes filled with hope. This was the moment he had been waiting for.

"I think you can just call him Lahan's Brother," Maomao said.

"Hey!" Lahan's Brother said, clapping a hand on Maomao's shoulder.

"All right. Lahan's Brother. Easy to remember. I like it."

"Listen, you!" Forgetting his manners, Lahan's Brother wheeled on Basen.

“So there you have it. He’s Lahan’s brother. That’s what he’s called, and that’s what he is. I think you know Lahan, yes? Lahan’s Brother isn’t as quirky as his brother; his brother’s a harmless, normal person. He’s also a professional potato farmer, so we can leave this to him.”

“Who’s normal?! And who’s a farmer?!” Lahan’s Brother demanded, but if he wasn’t a farmer, then what was he? She’d seen him tending those sprawling fields—he could afford to take a little more pride in his work.

“I hear you. If he’s a relative of Master Lakan’s, he deserves to be treated respectfully.”

Maomao had the distinct sense that Basen glanced at her as he said this, but she decided to ignore it. He didn’t seem to view her as falling into that same category.

Frankly, I could almost like that about him. Basen didn’t always treat her “respectfully,” to borrow a phrase, but he was easy to work with.

“Ahem...” said the man who looked like the village headman. Apparently that’s what he really was. “May I show you to your quarters?”

“Oh, yes, sure. If you would?”

Relieved, the headman led them to an open space in the middle of the village. “You can use this,” he said, pointing to a portable tent like the ones the nomads used. “This tent belonged to someone who settled here years ago, and it’s still serving its purpose. We keep it warm inside too. The women can stay in the small tent next to it.”

Maomao poked her head in to find that it was indeed warm, made from a frame that looked something like a net covered in felt. There was a carpet on the ground and a fireplace in the middle. Given the lack of windows, one might expect that to result in bad air quality, but a chimney extended from the fireplace to allow the smoke to escape. There was a pile of brown things beside the hearth—maybe the sheep pies the kids had been collecting. The carpet was worked with some kind of pattern. It might not be much, but the village was clearly trying to extend the best hospitality it could.

“Good timing—we were just about to break it down,” the headman said.

“Break it down?” Maomao asked.

“Yes; you see, we had a visitor just the other day as well.”

“Did his name happen to be Rikuson?”

“Y-Yes. Is he an acquaintance of yours?”

Maomao nodded: she knew it. What she still didn’t know was what

he'd come here for. She hadn't seen Rikuson since that first day, so she hadn't had a chance to ask him.

"It's already late, so I think for today we should eat and then get some rest. I'll post a guard outside your tent. That sound all right?" Basen asked.

"Yes, thank you, that's fine," said Maomao. She picked up her belongings and moved them to the smaller tent. She slipped off her shoes as she went inside, the fluffy carpet greeting her feet. There were several layers of felt underneath it. She took off her cloak and hung it on something that jutted out of the wall. Then she tossed herself spread eagle on the carpet.

Oops, better look alive.

She gave herself a quick smack on the cheek—the tent was so warm inside, and the carpet was so soft, that she felt like she might doze right off.

Just as she sat up, Chue came in.

"That looks nice, Miss Maomao. I think I'll join you!" She flung herself down on the carpet and grinned, blissful.

"Before you fall asleep, Miss Chue, can I ask you something?" Maomao tried to organize the thoughts that had been whirling in her head all day. As she considered, she found herself adopting a formal seated position, feet tucked under her behind. Chue mirrored her posture.

"Yep, of course. What is it?" She looked exactly like she always did.

"Those bandits... You were behind that, weren't you, Miss Chue?"

Chue didn't so much as blink at the question. "Whatever do you mean, Miss Maomao?" She cocked her head.

"Sorry. That sounded worse than I meant. What I was trying to say was, you *expected* the bandits to attack, and you had us come second, as bait, to minimize the harm they would do."

Still Chue looked unfazed. "What in the world gave you that idea?"

She didn't seem to be asking purely to throw Maomao off. She enjoyed hearing the answer.

"Well, first, I wondered why we were split into two groups at all. At first I thought maybe you were just trying to be nice to me and make sure I could get here as quickly as possible. I could see the same impulse behind the way Ji—er, I mean, the Moon Prince got us that comfortable saddle. But I couldn't shake the question: If we were going to split into two groups, why would both of the guides go with just one of them? It didn't make sense."

“Hoh! Hmm!”

Chue seemed like a good map reader, but even for her, a guide would be indispensable in unfamiliar territory. It was almost like she had gone out of her way not to have one.

“Secondly, that cloak,” Maomao said, pointing at the garment hanging on the wall.

“Aww, didn’t you like it?”

“I liked it very much. It kept me quite warm. The thing that struck me, though, was how lovely it is.”

“Lovely?”

Maomao looked at the cloak Chue was wearing. “I know you like to be showy, Miss Chue, so if you had two cloaks I might have expected you to take the more elaborate one for yourself. But instead you wore the plainer one.”

“Well, yes, but Miss Chue *does* know how to behave herself around her betters.” Her tone suggested otherwise.

“Yes, and the fact that you gave me the nicer cloak implied that it was from the Moon Prince. You bolstered that impression by talking about how he had given you the saddle. You practically had me convinced the cloak was from him too—but it wasn’t, was it?”

Maomao’s cloak had been pleasant to the touch. Covered in delicate embroidery, it would have been obvious what a fine piece of clothing it was, even at a distance.

“A cloak like that is like saying to the bandits ‘Please! Rob me!’ And by wearing a slightly plainer outfit, you made yourself look like the mark’s lady-in-waiting.”

“Hee hee hee! Miss Chue *is* practically your lady-in-waiting, Miss Maomao. So what you’re saying is that I separated us into two groups, then deliberately gave you a nicer cloak so that they would attack you?”

“Not so much attack me specifically. It’s more like you wanted to put all the best targets in one place.” This time Chue blinked. “If we’d all traveled with the wagon, it would have been quite a production. Having some soldiers around would have given us an advantage in battle, but we’d also have been with people who *weren’t* accustomed to being attacked. If we let them get traumatized, it might have had a negative impact on our work—not to mention the distinct possibility that they might be taken as hostages.”

The relentlessly ordinary Lahan’s Brother was a perfectly strong,

healthy guy, but he didn't seem like an experienced brawler. Maomao suspected he was as afraid of a fight as the next person.

"If, instead, we went in two groups, one of which was not only smaller but included someone who obviously looked like money, the bandits would be more likely to attack that group. Two women, one man—the man being Master Basen, who despite his outrageous strength still has that baby face and a relatively small build for a soldier. When they said to leave the women, they weren't thinking of selling us, were they? It was about the potential for ransom."

The bandits would never have expected Basen to turn out to be a bear in a man's clothing. But he was a lion-slayer, after all.

"That's all very clever, Miss Maomao, but if it's true, how did Miss Chue draw those bandits out at exactly the right moment? You can wear all the nice cloaks you want, but they were obviously waiting for us. They showed up at the perfect time, you might say."

"That would actually explain why you were talking to one of the guides earlier. Here's the third thing that made me suspicious: you spoke to one of the guides as soon as we arrived in the village. I think it's reasonable to assume that you thought one of them was crooked before you ever hired them." She thought of how the man paled as Chue spoke. "Before that first group left, you told each of the guides different things, didn't you? Like which watering hole the second group would use. You pull out a map and say you want to make sure of where you can take a rest. Convenient way to let them know where you're going to be, isn't it?"

There were any number of ways the guide might have slipped information to the bandits, even if Maomao didn't know exactly which one he'd used. *Who knows. Could have been pigeons, like the White Lady.*

"You deliberately hired a shady guide, someone you thought was in cahoots with bandits. Then you told each of them that you would be resting at a different location, so that you knew where you might be attacked. Was that so you could be sure which of the guides was clean? What if they'd both been dirty?"

Chue raised her hands in a gesture of surrender. "It was just the one of them!" she chirped. "I knew exactly who the other one was."

"Was this on the Moon Prince's orders?" Maomao had begged Jinshi to use her like a tool, so a situation like this wasn't completely unexpected. But it was out of character for him.

"No, it wasn't. You guessed right; I got the cloak for you."

“Is that so?”

It probably really wasn’t Jinshi, then. Did Chue belong to some chain of command that didn’t include him?

“You make Miss Chue’s life very hard, Miss Maomao, being so smart. Did you know that?”

“You don’t make my life any easier, Miss Chue, with the way I never know what you’re thinking.”

They both sighed.

“Miss Maomao, I have two requests.”

“Yes?”

“Miss Chue is always her cheerful, easygoing Chue self, so please always treat Miss Chue as you *would* treat Miss Chue.” She pulled out a string of little flags. *Shoop*.

“I’m...not sure what that means, but okay.” Maomao took the string and let it dangle from her fingers, unsure what else to do with it.

“In that case, Miss Maomao, Miss Chue has one other request for you. And it comes with a question.”

“Yes?”

“What made you think that that lovely, expensive cloak might *not* have come from the Moon Prince?” She seemed genuinely curious.

“I just thought that if he gave me something like that, it would have been of fine make, but more subdued. More practical.”

“Is that all?”

“That’s where we are right now.”

Jinshi had started to understand Maomao’s preferences.

Chue narrowed her eyes and looked to the entrance of the tent.

“Terribly sorry to disturb you,” a woman said from outside.

“Yes? Come in,” Maomao said, and there was a rustling of felt.

“Excuse me,” said a middle-aged woman, peering in. She was holding reins. “I’ve brought three goats as you asked. What would you like me to do with them?”

“Great! Thank you. Here’s payment.” Chue pressed some coins into the woman’s hand. She must have asked for these animals before coming to the tent.

Is she planning to take those goats home?

If she just wanted to eat them, it would be cheaper to buy some that had already been killed and butchered—and she wouldn’t need three of them. Between the goats and the duck, they were on their way to having their

own farm.

Chue took the goats' reins and dug through her luggage until she came up with a heavy-looking bag.

"What's that?"

"It's salt! We're not near the ocean, and you can't get rock salt around here, so salt is a treasured commodity. One our goat friends happen to love!"

"And, uh, what is this salt for?" Maomao couldn't imagine where Chue was going with this.

Chue grinned. "Negotiating! With the goats and the salt. Miss Chue is a pacifist, you see. She likes to do things the quiet way when she can. I'm sleepy, but I've got to take care of a job. You just rest your poor, tired self, Miss Maomao."

Chue twirled back toward the entrance of the tent, and then she was gone, goats and all.

Chapter 7: The Farm Village (Part 2)

Lahan's Brother stared fixedly at the earth. He reached down to check how it felt, and even put a bit of it in his mouth, then spat it out again.

"What do you think?" Maomao asked, watching him work.

A farmer's day started early. The sun was only just cresting the horizon, but Lahan's Brother was already up and about. Maomao had been so tired she couldn't actually sleep well, and then she'd heard the sounds of the farmers up first thing in the morning.

They were in the fields of the farming village where they had arrived the day before. The previous night, they'd asked the headman for permission to come out here, so here Lahan's Brother was without further ado.

Wheat was beginning to sprout in the field. Maomao wondered if the sheep and goats would eat it, but other than when they were put out to pasture, the animals were safely ensconced within a fence, so maybe it worked out.

"I think the soil is all right, and they keep it watered well. If anything, one could wish for slightly poorer soil around here."

"It's better if the soil *isn't* as nutritious?" Chue asked, poking her head over.

And to think, she can't have gone to sleep earlier than I did last night.

She'd returned sometime in the wee hours—her negotiations must've gone long. In spite of it, she seemed perfectly energetic.

Maomao figured it was best not to ask what exactly she had been negotiating about. Chue had insisted Maomao treat her the same way she always did, so Maomao kept quiet.

Lahan's Brother stood up and surveyed the field. "Unlike most vegetables, potatoes actually grow best if the soil isn't too rich. Sweet potato plants, if there are too many nutrients in the soil, they just grow a bunch of leaves, and no potato. White potatoes become prone to disease."

"Ah, yes, of course. By the way, bread by itself isn't much of a breakfast, so I'm going to make some congee too."

"Please do, that would be wonder—"

Chue was peeling a sweet potato.

“What do you think you’re doing?!” Lahan’s Brother demanded, snatching it away from her faster than lightning.

“Awww,” Chue said, twirling around theatrically.

“This is seed stock! For *planting*! Not for eating!”

“Yeah, but there’s nothing but wheat around here! There’s hardly even any rice. I thought some potato would bulk it up a bit.”

“Potato congee *does* sound good.” Maomao realized her stomach was growling. A nice, hardy congee would be better than bread to start the day.

“We’re going to plant this! You can’t eat it!” Lahan’s Brother said as if scolding a child. He sounded strangely like Frizzy-Glasses. Maybe it was because they were brothers. A nearby sheep looked up and gave a reproving “Baa!” as if to say “Keep it down!”

“Argh... I won’t be able to use this for stock anymore,” Lahan’s Brother groaned, looking miserably at the half-peeled potato.

“It’ll make a delicious breakfast, then!”

“Sigh... I guess it had better.”

“Not by itself, though! I’ll need at least three more!”

“No! Absolutely not!” Lahan’s Brother snapped, stopping Chue before she could do any more mischief. Maomao’s fists clenched. Truly, she saw, this most ordinary man had his place to shine: it was when quipping at someone that Lahan’s Brother came into his own.

“Okay, let’s forget about breakfast for a second. Do you think we can grow crops here?” Personally, Maomao would have liked to enjoy observing a bit more of this back-and-forth, but if she didn’t keep things moving they would never get anywhere.

Lahan’s Brother crossed his arms. “This place is a lot like Shihoku Province. Not as far north as that, but weatherwise, it’s more suited to white potatoes than sweet potatoes. It’s colder than Kaou Province.”

“I guess it does feel chilly. Funny, I thought it was pretty warm in the western capital.”

In fact, my ears hurt a little, Maomao thought, pinching her nose and blowing to balance them out.

“We’re a lot higher above sea level here than in the western capital.”

“I guess so.”

“Are we really?” Chue took a map out of the folds of her robe. “Miss Chue is an excellent map reader, but this one doesn’t list the elevations. No wonder the air seems so thin here!”

“I know because my father told me all about it,” the normal person

said, puffing out his chest.

"The temperature stays high in the western capital because the desert is so close. Around here, it's a bit cold even during the day," Chue said.

Maomao was only now starting to appreciate, on a visceral level, how different the climate could be even within a single province. "You really don't think the potatoes will grow?"

"I'm not sure. For sweet potatoes, temperatures like what Kaou Province gets in spring and early summer are ideal, and there's nothing quite like that anywhere here, in the desert or on the heights. It might be worth planting some just to see, but I think regular potatoes might be easier to grow. There's just one problem..."

Lahan's Brother looked downright stormy. There was clearly something about this situation that he didn't like. Suddenly he lunged toward the middle of the field and began stomping on the wheat, which was still hardly taller than grass—maybe the farmers had been late planting it.

"What's that you're doing? I think they're going to be very mad at you!" Chue said, although she only stood and watched.

"I'm the one who's mad! Look how few offshoots there are on this wheat! They haven't stomped it down at all!"

"Stomped it?" Maomao cocked her head, puzzled, as she watched Lahan's Brother crisscross the field like an agriculturally inclined crab.

"You have to tread on the wheat to encourage tillers. It makes the roots stronger too, and the wheat more resilient. But look at this field! They haven't been out here once! And not in any of the other fields either! More tillers means more ears! More ears means more harvest! Yet look at these pathetic crops!"

"Wow. There's a real farmer for you."

"Who's a farmer?!"

Uh... Who else?

Lahan's Brother continued his ridiculous crabwalk across the wheat field. He might not know it, like it, or want to admit it, but he was a farmer through and through. Chue must have decided the wheat treading looked like fun, because she joined Lahan's Brother in traipsing back and forth around the field. At which point it became clear that if Maomao didn't join them, this would never end.

They were still crab-walking as the villagers began to wake up, then began to crowd and gawk, observing the visitors' bizarre behavior from a

safe distance.

Basen popped out from among the crowd. “What are you...doing?” he asked. Personally, Maomao didn’t want to be interrogated about strange behavior by a man with a duck on his shoulder.

“You can’t call what they do around here *farming*!” Lahan’s Brother exclaimed from his place on the carpet.

“Please keep it down during meals, okay?” Chue said. She was stuffing bread into her cheeks like a squirrel.

Maomao and the others had gone back to their tent and decided to start by getting some breakfast. There was flatbread carrying skewers of sheep meat, and baozi. In the fireplace was a stewpot boiling with a soup of wheat and sheep meat. They were allegedly drinking tea, but it wasn’t like any tea Maomao had ever had. The color was lighter than most and it was made with goat’s milk instead of hot water.

Looks like dairy products and animal meat are the staples here. Not a lot of vegetables. There would probably have been even fewer if this weren’t a farming village.

They all ate together in the large tent. Chue’s congee wasn’t ready in time, so it would be dinner. The peeled potato had been cut thin and was cooking on the hearth.

Basen sat in front of the hearth, so Chue, Maomao, and Lahan’s Brother all got to sit somewhere warm. The others who had come with them, including the soldiers serving as their bodyguards, sat around them in a sort of ring.

The soup was hot but tasted weak; Maomao got some salt from Chue and put a pinch in her bowl. The skewers were far more satisfying than anything you could get from a street stall in the Imperial capital. The bread that served as a tray was tough; you had to break off bits of it and dip it in the soup. Put some warmed-up cheese on top of it, and it was delicious.

As for vegetables, there were a few in the soup and packed into the baozi, but the quantity left something to be desired.

“*Why* don’t they know how to cultivate the wheat? I’m telling you, that’s the question! Do you realize how much better the harvest would be if they stomped the crop?”

“I’m sure you’re very right. If you’re not going to eat your cheese, can I have it?”

“Hey! I haven’t even answered and you’re already eating it!”

Chue had snatched the cheese from Lahan's Brother's plate in a single swift motion.

She doesn't have to do that. Cheese was one thing there was plenty of. She seemed to be taking from Lahan's Brother just to get under his skin.

As Maomao and the others ate, they discussed what had happened in the fields earlier that day.

"We're supposed to be out here for an inspection of the farms. So what did you see, Lahan's Brother?" asked Basen, who already seemed to regard "Lahan's Brother" as his name. He might normally have been more punctilious about asking what he was really called—it was almost as if there was some supernatural force at work.

"I'm not... I told you, my name is—"

"You brought those seed potatoes. Presumably you mean to plant them," Maomao interrupted.

"I told you, Lahan said to plant them if there was anywhere good. And since he asked me, I feel like I have to see his request through, even if he is my no-account younger brother..."

He's a surprisingly stand-up guy for someone with such a terrible family.

Nonetheless, Lahan's Brother exuded something that made one want to mess with him.

"Okay, so you mentioned the wheat fields. Is there some sort of problem?"

"Big ones! Do these people here actually believe they've set up those fields properly?" Lahan's Brother took a slug of soup.

"I admit I'm no expert, but do they really deserve to be talked about like that just because they didn't do this wheat stomping or whatever?" Basen asked.

Maomao agreed with him. Wheat stomping improved the crop, no doubt, but it wasn't as if the wheat wouldn't grow without it. Maybe these people were busy with other things, and wheat stomping just fell by the wayside. Raising livestock was more important in I-sei Province, anyway.

"It's not just the stomping. Their planting methods are all over the place. I understand that they've done direct sowing, but you need to at least space the seeds evenly! That's not even to mention that they started planting too late in the season. And they need more fertilizer—lots more! The soil color was so uneven!"

"Wow, you really know your stuff. Potato?"

“I do not *know my stuff*! And I’m sick of eating potatoes!”

Maomao had no such objections; she was happy to take the baked sweet potato from Chue. It was perfectly sweet and delicious on its own—but spread a little butter on it, and it took on an extra dimension of richness. Chue evidently shared Maomao’s appreciation, because she discreetly took a few of them, cut them up, and started cooking them.

Maomao understood what Lahan’s Brother was getting at, but even she could think of a possible rejoinder. “Don’t farming methods vary from region to region? Maybe with them raising so much livestock here, wheat isn’t considered that important. Why develop refined techniques for working with a secondary crop?”

“You’re not wrong. I’m saying that the problem here isn’t ignorance, it’s indifference. They’ll never get much of a harvest to speak of with what they’re doing now. These people *know* the techniques, they just aren’t bothering to use them.”

“Because they have other sources of income, right? Is it that big a deal?” Basen asked, sipping some milk tea.

“That’s what I’m saying!”

“You mean, why would they go out of their way to do *bad* farming when they can just make money other ways, is that it?” Maomao said. She thought she saw what Lahan’s Brother was getting at.

“Y...Yes. That’s what I mean,” Lahan’s Brother said, relaxing somewhat now that he finally felt someone understood him.

“I don’t get it,” said Basen.

“This isn’t making sense to Miss Chue either. Explain in a way she can understand,” said Chue.

“If they can feed themselves entirely with nomadic grazing, why not do that?” Maomao said. “Settling down in one place to plant fields just makes it that much harder to raise livestock. Which implies there was some advantage to settled living that made the trade-off worthwhile.”

“Yeah. You’d run yourself ragged, trying to do this kind of thing while you traveled,” Basen observed.

“That’s right. It’s hardly unusual for nomadic herdspeople to settle down and become farmers—including, it would seem, the owner of this tent. So did they become farmers because they had no other choice, or because they thought there was some specific benefit to it? If they did it voluntarily, for the advantages, wouldn’t you expect them to be more interested in improving their harvests?”

Lahan's Brother nodded assiduously at Maomao's explanation, although the other two continued to look baffled.

"I guess I'm not much for explaining. Does that make any sense?" she asked.

"I mean... I get that something is off, here," Basen said.

"It's hard to put into words, isn't it?" Chue said.

Maomao groaned and took a bite of her potato, which had gone cold. There was nothing else remotely sweet around here, so the potato's sweetness was that much more pronounced.

Just then, Maomao looked toward the entrance of the tent. A couple of kids were peering in at the visitors with interest. A boy and a girl around ten years of age, probably siblings.

"Want some?" Maomao asked.

The kids looked a little intimidated, but reached out for the sweet potato, which they'd never seen before. They each took a bite, and their eyes went wide.

"Can we have more?" they asked.

"You may. But maybe you could answer some questions for me first," said Maomao. Since the kids had come right to them, this would be the perfect chance to dig up some information.

After breakfast, they toured the village with the kids.

"Are your families looking after the fields like they should? They're not cutting corners, are they?" Chue asked the siblings, not mincing words.

The brother and sister shared a look.

"But you can't cut corners in a field, can you?"

"Yeah, can you?"

"I don't think kids this young are going to understand what you're getting at, Miss Chue."

"You think not, Miss Maomao?" She gave the kids another cooked potato.

"The grown-ups say they can get money for starting fields. I don't know if that's what it means to cut corners, though."

"Money? You mean from selling the wheat?"

The older brother shook his head. "Nuh-uh. Um... They say you get the money even if you don't grow the crops, so life's easy..."

"Hey! You kids! We told you to stay away from the guests!" one of the adults roared, and the siblings ran off, frightened—although not enough to

drop their potatoes.

"No! Wait!" Maomao called after them, but it was too late. They were already gone.

So they get paid even if they don't grow anything? That sounded fishy. If it was true, it would explain why they didn't feel any compulsion to look after the crops.

"I'm sorry. Did those children do something wrong?" Maomao asked.

"No, nothing," the villager said, although he continued to give Maomao and the others an apologetic look. In that case, Maomao wished he wouldn't have shouted. He'd driven away two very pliant young informers. Maomao would have liked to ask them a little more about the money supposedly in those fields.

It doesn't look *like they're hiding anything*, she thought as they continued to walk around the village. To all appearances, it was quiet, peaceful. Unremarkable. There were no commercial shops to speak of; people mostly supported themselves. They said a merchant came by about once every ten days. The villagers proved to be kind and friendly. It was hard to imagine they were doing anything wrong.

Maybe the kids just misunderstood something, and now we're overthinking it.

There was one man, however, who seemed to be taking this far harder than Maomao was.

"Poor *Gege*! You look ready to smash something. Try putting on a smile!" said Chue, ever ready to give Lahan's Brother some grief.

Lahan's Brother scowled and looked at the village fields. He carried a bag full of seed potatoes. Nominally they were here on a tour of inspection, but he'd come along seeking a good opportunity to introduce this new crop—and if he was going to give people something new to grow, no doubt he would have liked them to be a little more interested in growing it.

Lahan's Brother always vehemently denied being a farmer, yet he was deeply devoted to the agricultural arts. He was your ordinary, good, paradoxical man. He might also have denied being ordinary, but the principle that motivated his behavior seemed as normal as the next person's.

The world is full of elder sons who aren't actually interested in inheriting family headship, Maomao thought, but she figured that if she pointed that out to Lahan's Brother, he would only get angry.

The most efficient thing might have been to split up and each start asking their own questions, but they couldn't make too much of a show of marching around. The patriarchal spirit was alive and well in I-sei Province, and a strange woman going here, there, and everywhere by herself was unlikely to be well received. They could assign a bodyguard, but it would be Maomao doing most of the talking, so it wouldn't solve the issue.

Chue doesn't seem to have any problem doing her own thing, though.

She'd claimed to have business to attend to and had disappeared somewhere. She could be a strange one, but Suiren accepted her, so she was probably safe.

Maomao's best bet would be to convince Lahan's Brother or Basen to ask questions on her behalf. If she had to choose one of them, she would choose Lahan's Brother—Basen had a duck following him around, and the villagers were giving him weird looks.

Luckily, Maomao didn't have to convince Lahan's Brother to do anything—he was already doing what she wanted. Namely, asking the villagers whether there had been any damage from insects lately.

"Insects, eh?" said one of the villagers.

"Yes. Bugs weren't especially bad last year?"

"Hmmm... Well, there're pests that come every year. Last year just like all the others. They did plenty of damage, sure enough, but we pulled through somehow. We can thank the governor that we have food to put on our tables."

The governor. Would that be Gyoku-ou? So the grasshoppers had been bad, but not bad enough to consume the entire crop?

"Hrm. All right. One more thing, then. That field over there—whose is that? I'd like to meet them." Lahan's Brother pointed at one of the wheat fields.

"What, that? Oh, that's Nianzhen's field. He's an old man, lives out on the edge of town. You can't miss his place—there's a shrine right next to it."

"Thanks. I'll have a look."

"You don't actually mean to go see him, do you?" The villager looked distinctly uncomfortable.

"I do. Some kind of problem with that?"

"Well, look, I won't stop you. It's just... The old guy can throw you for a loop sometimes. He's not a bad person, though. If it doesn't bother you, I

guess that's fine."

There was something funny in the villager's tone. If anything, it made them even more curious.

Maomao and the others headed for the edge of town like the villager had told them.

"Excuse me," Maomao said, tugging on Lahan's Brother's robe.

"Yeah?"

"What makes you so interested in that particular field?"

"Can't you tell? It's the only pretty one out there."

"Pretty?"

There might have been better descriptors for a field, or maybe better things to describe as *pretty*, but Lahan's Brother was completely serious.

"The other fields are scattershot, not laid out well—only that one is neatly divided into sections. It's been stomped too—there's good, strong wheat growing there."

"If you say so."

When he mentioned it, she thought maybe she could see it, but sadly, Maomao didn't have that much interest in wheat.

Doesn't look like there's any mondo grass around here...

Thinking of wheat naturally led her to think of medicinal plants. The plant she had in mind, though, sometimes called snakebeard, really had nothing to do with wheat. Specifically, she thought of the roots. Wheat with ergot could be used medicinally, although its toxic properties tended to get more attention. Since there were no ears yet, anyway, it was hard for her to muster much interest.

There are no good plants anywhere around here!

Maomao was on the verge of suffering from a chronic lack of medicinal herbs, a condition made all the worse by the great variety of medicines she'd been able to encounter since becoming a medical assistant.

Drugs! I want to see some drugs...

Just the thought brought on a sudden episode, her breath growing ragged. There hadn't even been any good medicine along the roadside on the way here.

"H-Hey, are you all right? You don't look so good," Lahan's Brother said, concerned.

"P-Pardon me. It's nothing..."

Easy enough to say, but she wanted to see some drugs. To smell them.

She would take anything, even if it was poisonous. What was there nearby that might serve as a medicine? Maybe the sheep grazing idly in the fields.

Can you use their horns as medicine? I can't quite remember...

She thought it was called *ling yang jiao*, and *yang* meant "sheep." These must have been a different kind of sheep, however, because their horns didn't look anything like the medicinal ones Maomao had seen.

Maybe they would still have a similar effect...

Arms outstretched like a hungry ghoul, Maomao reached for the sheep nearest the fence.

"Whoa! Hey! I knew there was something wrong with you!" Lahan's Brother pinned her hands behind her back. Maomao was perfectly aware that her behavior was erratic, but her body seemed to act on its own. She just needed medicine—any medicine!

"M...Medicine," she rasped, trying to urge Lahan's Brother to bring her some sort of drug, anything at all.

"Medicine? Are you sick?"

"What's going on here?" Basen asked, coming over with his duck.

"She says she needs medicine."

"She does? Come to think of it, Lady Suiren gave me something before we left." Basen plucked a cloth-wrapped object from the folds of his robe. "She said that if the 'cat' started to act strange, I should show her this."

The package was marked *One*. He unwrapped it slowly: it contained something dried.

"S-Seahorse!"

Perhaps known better by the name *dragon's bastard*. Bizarre underwater life-forms not quite fish and not quite insects.

Basen promptly hid the dried creature away again.

"No!"

"Hmm, let's see here," Basen said, perusing a note that was tucked in the package. "Quack!" quacked the duck, reading over his shoulder. "'If Maomao starts acting funny, show her the contents of this package. However, you must not let her have them immediately. Once the job is done, she may have one of them.'"

It was Basen reading the note, yet somehow Maomao heard Suiren's voice.

It's her and that old hag...

Suiren didn't handle Maomao quite the same as the madam of the Verdigris House, but she had her ways—and they worked. She'd seen

Jinshi dangle medicinal prizes in front of the apothecary enough times that she knew what worked on Maomao. The fact that she'd given Basen this thing, right down to the note, proved that she still saw him as a soft little boy who needed a nanny to show him how to get Maomao to do what he wanted.

"You heard the lady," Basen said. "Have you recovered from your little attack?"

"Yes, sir! All better!" She flung her hands in the air to demonstrate.

"How can that be? Who ever heard of a medicine that works just by looking at it?!" demanded Lahan's Brother, not failing to interject.

"They say that sickness begins in the spirit. Anyway, don't worry about it. We need to hurry up and do our job," said Maomao.

And get that seahorse!

They did say seahorses boosted vitality.

"No, stop. This doesn't make sense. Something's wrong here. Something's *wrong* here!"

"I don't know, Lahan's Brother. The way you repeat yourself like that reminds me of someone..."

Specifically, someone with tousled hair and glasses.

"I told you, my name isn't Lahan's Brother! It's—"

"Welp, we'd better get going. Time's a-wasting," said Basen, interrupting Lahan's Brother before he could give them his name—it was practically a running gag by now. They would have to be careful it didn't overstay its welcome.

The farmer had spoken of a shrine, but it didn't quite look like the shrines Maomao was used to. It was made of brick, and there were no windows. Inside hung a cloth, and in place of a statue there was a painting of the gods on the wall.

Beside the shrine was a shack, seemingly the house the villager had mentioned.

"All right, here goes nothing," said Lahan's Brother, who still didn't look like he thought this was a good idea. He knocked on the door. Then he waited. There was no response. "Maybe he's out?"

"Do you think he's at work? I'm sure he has to take care of some sheep or his field or something." It was almost lunchtime, though, so hopefully he would be back soon.

Just then, a low, raspy voice came from behind them. "Can I help

you?”

Maomao and the others turned to find an older man with tanned skin standing there. He had a hoe in his hands and a cloth wrapped around his neck—the very picture of a farmer. His clothes, patched in places, were streaked with dark soil.

Yes, he was a farmer all right—but Basen’s hand immediately went to his sword and he settled into a fighting stance. Maomao saw why.

“Hey, now, what do you think you’re doing? Going to assault a simple farmer?”

The man’s tanned skin was covered with discolorations, some from age, others from long hours spent under the blazing sun. Those, however, were not what had startled Basen.

No, that would be the man’s missing left eye. The cavity yawned in his face, the eyeball simply absent. His right hand, wrapped around the hoe, was missing its pointer finger, and his exposed skin was covered with scars from swords and arrows. Maomao saw why the villager had seemed so intimidated, and why Basen had reacted instinctively. This man had the air not of a farmer, but of a soldier.

“Have you been in the military, sir?” Basen asked, careful to sound polite.

“Nothing as fancy as that. I was just a locust making trouble in the plains.”

Locust...

A striking choice of words. And there was something else that nagged at Maomao.

“Have you been working in the fields?” she asked before she could stop herself. There was the hoe in his hands and the mud on his shirt—she recognized the stains.

“What else d’you think I’d be doing?” the man asked, although he didn’t sound particularly bothered.

Maomao’s question had, indeed, seemed obvious—but there was something that had dawned on her as she looked at the village fields. “I just didn’t think one normally got quite so dirty doing fieldwork.”

You wouldn’t get this filthy even tending the wheat, not at this time of year. The dust of the fields was dry; so long as one didn’t go out of one’s way to use damp earth, it shouldn’t have stuck like this.

“Tell me, did a man named Rikuson come this way?”

“Hrm... You friends of his?” The farmer blinked at them with his one

eye, then opened the door to his shed. “Come on inside. I can offer you goat’s milk, at least.”

He leaned his hoe against the wall and ushered them in.

The old man was indeed Nianzhen, and his house was as plain inside as it was outside.

It’s a lot like my house, actually, Maomao thought, picturing her shack in the pleasure quarter. Nianzhen had a hearth, a cot, and a very modest table; that was about it aside from farm implements. His house seemed to be dedicated to farming much the way Maomao’s was to medicine.

Judging by this room, he looks like a pretty simple man.

Those scars all over his body, though—those didn’t seem like the marks of a man who’d made his living as an honest farmer.

There were three chairs inside. Nianzhen let the guests sit, while he stayed standing and poured goat’s milk into chipped teacups. The duck pecked at the dirt floor. Some grain must have spilled there.

“You’re right—a man named Rikuson did come through here. Would’ve been about ten days ago.” Just a day before Maomao and the others met him in the western capital.

“Do you know what he was here for?” Maomao asked. She’d originally planned to let Basen or Lahan’s Brother do the talking, but since she had brought up Rikuson, she would handle this conversation.

“What he was here for? All he did was grab a hoe and help me plow.”

“Plow? You mean, to get ready for the spring planting?”

Wheat could be grown in two seasons. Seeds planted in winter could be harvested in spring or early summer, while seeds planted in spring could be harvested in autumn.

“No, no. I do need to do the spring planting, but that wasn’t what this was about.”

Nianzhen put the goat’s milk on the table and slid the cups toward Maomao and the others. Basen looked like he wasn’t too sure about this unfamiliar drink, but Maomao was grateful for the opportunity to wet her throat. It was normal goat’s milk—lukewarm, but without anything weird in it.

“Might sound a little overblown, but I had him help me with the ritual.”

“Ritual?” Maomao asked. Basen and Lahan’s Brother traded a look, as confused as she was. “You mean some sort of ceremony to pray for a good harvest?”

“More like to prevent a bad one.”

“I’m sorry... This is all a little difficult for me to follow. Do you think you could explain more thoroughly?”

In response, Nianzhen sat on the bed, his tongue sticking out of his mouth. His less than refined manners were showing. “You lot willing to listen to an old man prattle for a bit? The villagers sure aren’t.”

“Listen, *sir*, we don’t have much time to spare,” Basen said, growing annoyed.

“Oh, well, pardon me.” Nianzhen lay down and rolled over on the cot.

Maomao got to her feet, holding up a hand to stop Basen. “Sir, I’m sorry. Please tell us what you have to say.” She bowed her head. Apologies were free, after all. If he was going to get all bent out of shape about this, she might as well say sorry.

“Hrrm, I don’t know,” Nianzhen said. From someone else, it might have sounded playful. From him, it came off as sadistic. “I don’t think I feel like it anymore.”

“You watch your attitude!” Basen was about to surge forward, but Maomao stopped him again. Lahan’s Brother, unused to conflict, had become a bystander.

I know he’s hotheaded, but I wish he would stop picking fights. She knew Basen’s strength, and highly doubted an old man would stand a chance against him. *But who knows? Sometimes these stubborn old bastards turn out to be tougher than you’d think.* Maybe Basen could best the old man physically, but what if he simply refused to admit defeat and clammed up?

That would be bad for us.

She had a feeling that Nianzhen was just being stubborn. He’d let them into his house when they’d mentioned Rikuson—she suspected there was actually something he wanted to get off his chest.

“What can we do to get you to talk to us?” Maomao said, as humble as she could be.

“Hrm. Well, how about a little guessing game?”

“Sir? What exactly are we supposed to guess?”

“Simple. What I used to be.”

Yeah, simple. If only I knew what he meant.

Basen and Lahan’s Brother were still looking at each other. The duck did what Basen couldn’t and pecked at the old man’s feet.

“All right, I’ll take a shot,” Basen said, but Nianzhen waved his hand

with too few fingers.

"I'm not asking you, kid. I'm talking to the girl there."

"K-*Kid?*" Basen forced himself to keep it together. To an old, heavily scarred man like this, he really was nothing but a young whippersnapper.

So only Maomao had the right to answer. The question became, what should she say?

Nianzhen... It's a good, strong name. It meant "to intuit the truth." *I hope he's as honest as his name suggests, and that everything he's told us is true,* she thought, reviewing in her mind what he had said. Nianzhen had called himself a "locust," not a favorable bug for a farmer.

So he savages crops?

Nianzhen lacked his pointer finger as well as his left eye.

You don't usually get hurt that bad as a farmer. But he says he's never been in the army.

He must at least have been in some kind of battle. Several, judging by the extent of his injuries.

Without his finger, he wouldn't be able to use a weapon. Especially a bow...

Maomao found herself thinking about the bandits who had attacked them the day before. They and their broken arms were probably in the hands of the authorities by now.

Only a couple outcomes for robbers like them. Hanging, for one. The best they can hope for is mutilation...

Then she remembered Nianzhen saying that Rikuson had helped him with a ceremony of some kind.

"Nianzhen," she said.

"Yeah?" His attitude defied her to guess. Lahan's Brother was looking at Maomao with what seemed to be indignation, not that it mattered to her. Maybe he didn't like that she already knew this random old guy's name even though they'd met just a few minutes earlier.

Not the problem right now. Maomao took in a breath and let the words out in a rush: "Were you a human sacrifice, sir?"

Everyone froze.

"What kind of answer is that?!" Basen demanded.

"You don't know the expression? It's when someone is sacrificed while still alive."

"Of course I know that! What I *don't* know is why you think it has anything to do with this old man. He's obviously still alive!"

Whereas proper sacrifices tended to end up dead.

Maomao, however, stood by her answer. “He didn’t ask *why*. Only *what*.”

She looked at Nianzhen, who showed none of Basen’s disbelief or annoyance. Instead, he looked somehow satisfied. “Yes,” he said, “I see. A sacrifice. Maybe that’s what I was.”

Nianzhen let out a long breath and narrowed his single remaining eye.

“Would the three of you be so kind as to listen to the ramblings of a foolish old man?” His tone was light, but there was deep emotion in his eye.

“If you would be so kind as to let us,” Maomao replied. This time Basen and Lahan’s Brother, mindful not to upset Nianzhen again, bowed their heads respectfully.

Chapter 8: An Old Man’s Ramblings

It was over fifty years ago now and there were twice as many nomads as there are today. Maybe more. I was one of them, born into a tribe that was—well, you might say more warlike than many of the others. Being martial-minded sounds good and all, but in truth we were little more than brigands. We mostly raised livestock, but if one of us wanted a wife, he would go to one of the neighboring tribes or a settled village and just take one. Theft and even the selling of people were just ordinary side businesses for us.

Oh, don’t give me that look. I know it was wrong. But at the time, I didn’t question it—I thought that was how life worked. My grandfather had done it, and his father. My grandmother and mother were both abducted women. It all seemed perfectly natural to me. But I know better than anyone just how bad it was.

Moving on.

I was a young man then, just in my teens, but even the chieftain trusted my bow arm. He always wanted me in raiding parties. I knew that if we won our battles, we ate good food, got more things. If the losers didn’t like it, well, it was their own fault for letting us beat them. An easy pride to muster when you’ve never tasted defeat yourself.

That pride spread, until it had infected the entire tribe.

Then one day, the chieftain’s son, he says he wants a Windreader girl.

The Windreader tribe, they were... Hmm. Something like priests, I guess. They were entrusted with rituals for everyone on the plains. They moved about the land, raising birds and reading the wind. They had a lot of very intelligent people in that tribe—they could tell you what the weather would be each year, and they were never wrong.

There were a lot of hard people among our clans. Violent people. But there was an unspoken understanding—no one touched the Windreader tribe.

Until we broke that rule.

We attacked the Windreader tribe to get a wife for our future chief. The Windreaders were right in the middle of one of their rituals, hardly a bow or sword among them. What *did* they have? Strange things. Seems the

ritual involved domesticated birds, and hoes. The women followed the birds around, while the men worked the ground with their hoes.

Funny stuff, right? But that was the ritual, I guess. I remember the chieftain's boy laughing. How he sneered, "They look like a bunch of farmers." And then he said, "Fire."

I remember how my bow creaked just before I let my arrow loose. The way it twanged, the arc the arrow took. The *thwack* as it found its mark in one of the Windreaders' heads.

That was the signal to attack.

They were defenseless as babes. They had no weapons; they were just working the earth. It took no skill to kill them—it was as easy as cornering an injured deer.

The pillaging that took place that day was the worst I had ever seen in my life, although it didn't sink in until later. We didn't hesitate to kill those who served us as priests. In fact, that made everything worse. Maybe it was the fear of murdering them—the fear that if we left any of them alive, they might tell the gods what we had done.

We killed all the grown men, and the older women too. We left only the young women alive. The youngest children we sold into slavery, and the tribe's birds? Those became our dinner.

Sickening story, isn't it? But we did it. It was even exciting, in a way.

That's why we didn't notice, not then—even during the looting, one particularly stupid bird kept pecking at the ground. I remember seeing him, but I just speared the creature. Only later did I learn he might have been the only thing standing between us and disaster.

After that, we let our appetites run even wilder than we had before. The chieftain's son took the Windreader girl against her will, and she became pregnant. About the time she bore her second child, that was when the catastrophe came.

There was a great dark shadow over the whole plain, like a smear of charcoal against the sky. At first, we thought it was an unseasonable rainstorm.

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Then we heard what seemed like a ringing in our ears. The livestock were restless. The children clung to us in fear, and the women held them close.

One man rode off on his horse, saying he was going to investigate, but he was soon back, almost fleeing toward us. His clothes were in tatters—but so was his hair, even his skin. His horse was near mad with fright; I tell you, it was a job to calm her down. She looked like she'd been bitten by something. We asked the man if he'd been attacked.

Looks like you already have a pretty good idea of what he found, but let an old man spell it out for you. The villagers, they don't believe this story at all. There hasn't been anything *that* size around here for decades, they tell me.

Anyway, the scout didn't have to tell us what he'd found—because a moment later, it found us.

Bugs. Bugs all over our camp, more than you could count. Grasshoppers.

They were a black cloud that attacked our tents. The beating of their wings was deafening, and the only thing worse was the sound of them chewing. The sheep grazing in the fields ran off, terrified, and the dogs howled like beasts possessed.

The men swung their swords wildly, but what were they going to do, bat the things out of the sky? We tried swinging torches instead, but we couldn't have had a worse idea. Burning grasshoppers crawled all over everything and everyone, and the tragedy only got worse.

I started stomping on the insects on the ground; it was the only thing I could think of to do. None of them were bigger than a couple of *sun*, yet it was like we were in the belly of a giant grasshopper.

The women tried to hide in the tents, but the bugs got in through the cracks. I could hear the children crying inside. I could hear their mothers screaming; they didn't even stop to comfort their kids. They heaped abuse on their husbands, on the men who couldn't protect their own families from the insects. These were women who had been snatched away from their own homes to be brides, and now they let out everything they had been storing up until that moment.

The grass wasn't enough for the creatures; they set upon our food stores as well. Wheat, beans, and vegetables, sure; but they even went for our dried meat. They chewed holes in our tents. When they finally left, the only things in their wake were people exhausted from screaming, and

countless dead grasshoppers.

They had eaten everything, and our livestock had run away.

We somehow managed to find a horse, and we headed to a village to try to procure some kind of food. We knew we were just bandits to them, so we tried to pick someone they wouldn't recognize. But it wasn't enough. As soon as he got close, they shot him. We never dreamed they would shoot someone without even trying to find out who it was first.

We ran. He couldn't keep up with us, but we ran just the same. I remember him reaching out to us, begging for help, but there was nothing we could do for him. Instead we just left him there.

I looked back, just once. The villagers had dragged our friend and his horse into the village. I guess we should have known. It wasn't as if we were the only ones ravaged and left starving by the grasshoppers.

I just prayed that the man we'd abandoned didn't suffer before he died. I know. Funny, right? Prayer from the ones who had murdered their priests.

We had nothing else to eat, so we killed the few animals we had left. We made soup, trying to fill it out with some grasses, but all we did was make ourselves sick. Some of the kids were so hungry they resorted to eating the grasshoppers on the ground, then one of them died. Maybe the grasshoppers were poisonous, or maybe they ate the things without tearing off the legs first; I don't know. They wasted away for want of nutrition, then started dying as they grew too weak to go on.

Then there were the pregnant women—they needed twice as much nutrition as the rest of us, so of course they grew weak too. Their bodies wasted, but their bellies kept getting bigger. The wife of the next chieftain was like that—there was no food for her after the tragedy. Her first child clung to her, sucking its thumb to try to distract itself from the hunger.

You won't be surprised to hear that the second was stillborn.

The death of his child just about broke the chieftain's son—and he suffered another blow when his wife died soon after the birth.

With the last of her strength, she said, "You bastards desecrated the ritual, and now there are no more Windreaders to do the offices for you! The insects will menace the people of the plains for the rest of time!"

She must've had those words inside her for years, ever since we had killed her people and abducted her. She chortled with laughter and died clutching her withered child to her wasted body.

People began to agree that it was as she said: we were the cause of this

disaster, for having interrupted the ritual observance. Everyone on the plains took us as their enemies.

I'm not going to pretend we didn't deserve it, but just the same, we wanted to survive. We ate grass, we ate bugs, we killed and were killed, and we kept fleeing.

One starving man resorted to eating the flesh of his dead friend. When that wasn't enough, he started trying to kill the living for food. My left eye? I lost it to an arrow shot by someone who wanted to eat me. I pulled it straight back out and shot him back.

I didn't want to eat *or* be eaten, so I ran away. There was nothing to run to, though, and I found myself starving, my throat parched. Unable to bear the hunger any longer, I followed the smell of congee into a city. They were having a food distribution by the grace of the local governor. The congee they handed out was tasteless sludge hardly fit for livestock, but to me it was the most wonderful thing I had ever eaten.

I was still snotty and weeping when the guards arrested me. Seems someone in town recognized me from some act of banditry. I didn't resist. I was through fighting—I just hoped they would feed me in prison. The thought of a few square meals before I was hanged brought joy to my heart.

I never did get to be hanged.

Instead, in punishment, they cut off my finger so I could never use a bow again. Then they made me a farmer. To this day, I think they let me off lightly, considering what I did.

The governor, as it turned out, knew about the Windreaders and their ceremony. They were allowed to continue with the mysterious ritual for their food because they were under the governor's protection. We might not know what the ritual meant, I was told, but it did mean something.

What? Who was this governor? He's gone now—with the rest of the Yi clan, as I'm sure you know. This was back before that upstart Gyokuen made his name.

The Yi clan knew about the Windreaders' ceremony, which is why they scattered us across the land as serfs—to replace the Windreaders.

Sadly, all a serf can do is work the land. The Yi didn't know what it was the Windreaders were doing with their birds, and anyway, chickens were about all we had around. So we continued with the ritual, but in an incomplete form.

So you're right. I was allowed to live purely so the ritual would live on.

I’m a human sacrifice that they happen to call a serf.

This village was founded by sacrifices like me. We built that shrine in memory of the Windreaders we killed. I paid with my life, a pittance compared to murdering our priests and bringing disaster upon us. I’m sure no one who paid any attention to us would believe the trade was worth it.

That all takes us up to seventeen years ago. When the Yi clan was wiped out, the farmers disappeared to wherever they liked. A few fools, men who’d always been the rough kind, went back to banditry. Ahh, I know that look. You’ve met a few highwaymen yourself. Who knows? Maybe I’d recognize them if I saw them.

You want to know why I stayed here? Simple—because I never want to have grasshoppers tearing at me again. No, never again...

All right, that’s enough rambling. Got any questions for me?

Chapter 9: Rite and Ritual

Nianzhen took a mouthful of lukewarm goat's milk to wet his parched throat. Maomao, Basen, and Lahan's Brother waited in silence.

I didn't expect to get so much information out of him, Maomao thought. She would have to try to sort through all he had told them.

She crossed her arms. So more than fifty years ago, Nianzhen and his tribe had destroyed the Windreaders, and several years after that, a major insect plague had occurred. Nianzhen believed the plague had been caused by the loss of the ritual. He'd become a serf, destined to spend the rest of his life performing that ritual. That seemed like a fair summary.

I guess the ritual involves tilling the earth?

It still didn't quite make sense to Maomao—but it did to someone else.

"Nianzhen? It's Nianzhen, right? You're talking about fall plowing, then?"

Maomao and Basen both looked at Lahan's Brother quizzically—they didn't recognize that expression.

"It's exactly what it says—plowing after the harvest in the fall," he explained.

"And that's...good? Wouldn't it be more efficient to plow right before you plant the crops?" Basen asked. Maomao agreed with him.

"I'm aware of a couple of advantages. For one, you can improve the soil by turning it over and putting down paddy straw mushrooms or some other fertilizer, and for another, it helps eliminate eggs laid in the soil by pest insects."

Maomao's ears twitched, and she grabbed Lahan's Brother by the collar. "Say that again!"

"Er, uh, you can put down paddy straw..."

"No, the other one!"

"Eliminating pest insects?"

"Yes, that!" Maomao shook him violently.

"Hey, quit it," Basen said, holding her back. "You're choking him!"

Maomao let Lahan's Brother go.

"Ow! Yeesh! Is it that exciting? It's a pretty ordinary farming activity," he said, in the clear belief that this was general knowledge.

“I don’t know if there are a lot of farmers out there as diligent as you!” Maomao rejoined.

“Er... Oh. Uh, you think so?” Lahan’s Brother was clearly having some conflicting feelings. He appreciated the compliment, but it was hard for him to accept.

“Yes, that’s exactly what I’m doing,” Nianzhen broke in. “A quick look around this village probably told you—it doesn’t matter if the people around here know what to do or not; most of them just don’t care to do it. And if knowledge isn’t used, it gets lost.”

Maomao felt a pang. Lahan’s Brother had said the old man was the only one in town trying to keep up a decent field.

“May I ask you something? Are the people here even making an honest effort to raise wheat? It sort of feels like they aren’t, well, trying very hard,” Maomao said, shamelessly cribbing from Lahan’s Brother.

“So,” Nianzhen said, “it’s obvious even to the visitors, is it?”

“Yes, sir. Your field was much prettier than the others.”

Anyway, that’s what a pro farmer told me.

“I’m not trying to be pretty. I’m just trying to get a better harvest, and the field turns out that way. I can tell you, I never thought I would be the only one working myself to the bone out here.”

“Funny how life works out.” Basen’s dig had to hurt. He was a serious and dedicated military man. Maomao could understand why he might take a dim view of someone who had done things that put him at the bottom of the human dung heap, even if it was more than fifty years ago now. He might even be wondering why the man hadn’t been given a harsher punishment.

Maomao had to admit, she couldn’t help wondering the same thing. She knew, though, that executing Nianzhen wouldn’t have changed anything. Because he had been left alive, at least they could talk to him and learn what he knew.

I wonder how Rikuson found out about him.

Maybe, like Maomao, he’d simply walked around this village, and maybe, like Lahan’s Brother, he’d noticed the quality of the fields. Or perhaps he’d heard about Nianzhen from someone in the western capital.

They were talking about criminals who had become serfs fifty years and more before, and had been released from that status long ago. Rikuson was still a fresh face in this area; Maomao doubted he’d come here knowing about them.

Well, asking was quicker than pondering.

"Do you know if Rikuson came to this village because he'd found out about the ritual?"

"Yeah, that's right. I didn't think there was anyone left who knew about the ritual. Even the governor doesn't seem to have heard of it. Rikuson, he said something about an acquaintance mentioning it." Nianzhen put down the now empty cup of milk and shifted on the hard-looking bed.

"The governor doesn't know about it? Do you mean Master Gyokuen, sir?"

In his story, Nianzhen had described Gyokuen as an upstart governor.

"Ah, sorry, bad choice of words. Not him. Yeah, Master Gyokuen is the ruler of I-sei Province, but it's his whelp who's been running things lately."

"You mean his son?"

"Yeah, what's-his-name. Gyoku-ou."

It seemed a former bandit and former serf was not inclined to show undue respect to the governor. Not that Maomao cared, but Basen appeared to take exception to Nianzhen's attitude. At least, she told herself, he resisted turning physical with the guy.

"I got the impression that Master Gyoku-ou is well regarded in this village. What's behind that? Does it have something to do with the ritual?" Maomao asked.

"Hardly. He's popular, plain and simple. He never punishes the farmers even if there's a bad harvest. In fact, he's so generous that if we don't have enough to eat, he gives to us from the stores. Hell, you can almost get more that way than you would by doing a proper job."

"Wow, wish I could say that," Lahan's Brother piped up.

"Yeah, he's a real compassionate guy. A lot of the nomads are settling down. They say they'll be better off as farmers." Behind Nianzhen's words, Maomao thought she caught a tone of contempt.

"You'd think such a compassionate leader would want to continue the ritual," Lahan's Brother said, setting down his empty cup with a *tink*.

"Like I said, he doesn't know the ritual. He doesn't understand. Even the Yi clan didn't know exactly what the ritual was or how it worked. What they make me do these days is just a pale imitation, based on the best of their knowledge."

"So this ritual wasn't about petitioning the gods at all—it was really a

way of preventing insect plagues," Maomao said.

"That's what I think. It's the work me and the other serfs were given to do in exchange for our lives. If we didn't want to do it, too bad—they forced us. A few guys couldn't stand it and tried to run away, and a few guys just plain slacked off, but the authorities caught them and hanged them to a man. What did they expect, when they'd spat on their chance to get off lightly? When you're told that you plow the fields or you die, then you plow like your life depends on it."

What Nianzhen had done was never going to be simply forgiven or forgotten, so what else was there for him to do?

"After a decade, they started giving us some small change based on the size of the harvest. It wasn't much, but it meant we could start saving up, and that was everything. We're close to the western capital here—I think the proximity increased the income from the harvest. It was such a simple thing, but it got us involved, made us start thinking about how we could improve yields or keep the crops from getting sick or keep the bugs away. Part of the reason we started keeping chickens was so they could eat whatever insects turned up when we plowed the fields."

"Quack," quacked the duck, not that it was relevant.

"So the birds the Windreaders used weren't chickens?" asked Maomao.

"No, they weren't. Chickens aren't suited to a nomadic life."

"But if they weren't chickens, then..." Basen looked very serious. "They must have been ducks!"

"No, they weren't ducks! What's wrong with you?" Lahan's Brother exploded.

Basen frowned at this instantaneous comeback. "Ducks eat bugs. And they're bigger than chickens, which means they can eat *more* bugs... Right?"

"Ducks like water. This is a *desert*. No one is going to raise any ducks!"

"I have proof positive that you're wrong," Basen said, indicating his duck. "Even waterfowl can grow big and strong here if they put their minds to it."

"Whoever heard of a duck putting its mind to anything?!" Lahan's Brother demanded, but it was hopeless: Basen was a complete duck fanboy. The animal at his feet seemed to puff out her chest.

"Hate to break it to you, but they weren't...ducks, did you call them? I've never seen one of these before," Nianzhen said. Lahan's Brother

smirked at Basen, who sulked and patted his duck on the head. “The birds are exactly what we’re missing to do the Windreader ritual. Those birds weren’t about eating bugs—they were used to find them. No one can just guess where there’s going to be insects on all the wide plains, can they? I’d say it was because the Windreaders knew how to do that, that the Yi clan gave them their protection.”

And now here was a serf, a survivor of a decimated tribe that had believed the Windreaders and their rites were nothing but superstition.

“All right, can I get back to work? There’s so much yet to do.” Nianzhen heaved himself to his feet.

“Of course, sir. Whatever it is that you still have to do, perhaps you would let us help?” Maomao asked, before looking to either Basen or Lahan’s Brother for approval.

“You visitors from the western capital have funny hobbies. Your Rikuson, he said the same thing. Sure, I’d appreciate it. I’m the only former serf around here. Everyone else came to this village later; they don’t give a care about anyone’s fields but their own. It’s only me looking after the fields of the guys who are gone, and it gets harder every year...”

Nianzhen had to be almost seventy by now. Old enough that he might die at any time, yet he kept laboring away.

I can’t countenance what he did, but still.

As Nianzhen shuffled away, Maomao felt like she could see shackles around his ankles.

For the next two days or so, Maomao and the others helped Nianzhen with his work. They turned over the earth with farming implements, discovering ants and earthworms and small beetles in the damp soil—and something else: long, thin blobs that, on closer inspection, had tiny eggs inside.

The chickens started with the earthworms, but when those ran out they moved on to these bundles of eggs. Basen’s duck joined them, pecking away at the ground.

Grasshopper eggs?

Maomao would have liked to calculate how many there were likely to be in a one-*tan* field, but she didn’t have time. Whenever she found an egg bundle that the birds had missed, she would pluck it out of the ground and place it in a jar.

These are probably the larger ones, she thought.

It was the kind of work that would drive someone with a fear of insects insane. Even Maomao, who had a good deal of experience with grasshopper dissection, didn't enjoy looking at the little egg bundles.

Lahan's Brother and Basen both plowed several times as much soil as Maomao could manage. Lahan's Brother showed his stuff as a true farmer—the way he held and used the hoe was just different—while Basen's ridiculous strength, for once, served him well.

I'm glad Basen was willing to join us here. He could have refused on the grounds that this wasn't soldier's work; there wouldn't have been much she could do then. He seemed to have taken Jinshi's concern about the grasshoppers to heart, though, and joined in without complaint. It probably seemed easy compared to raising ducks.

Basen's willingness to be part of this convinced the guards and farmers they'd brought from the western capital to help out too. It looked like they were going to plow the entire field within the day. Even Chue was there, scampering across the plowed earth picking up any stray grasshopper eggs. Two children followed close behind her—the brother and sister she'd given the potato to. They seemed to be under the impression that if they helped out, there might be another potato in it for them.

"Miss Maomao! Miss Maomao! I've got lots! Wanna see?"

"Miss Chue! Miss Chue! I don't want to see them. Although if you have a praying mantis ootheca, I'll gladly take it." Praying mantis eggs could be made into a medicine called *sang piao shao,* or mantis egg case, which was pretty valuable in that it was hard to get in large quantities.

"These eggs are hatching—there's little guys coming out of them! Sure you don't want to see, Miss Maomao?"

"Well, it is spring. And yes, I'm sure. They're disgusting; please don't show them to me."

From the insect encyclopedia in the Shi clan fortress, Maomao had learned that grasshoppers lived for about three months and could lay upward of a hundred eggs at a time. The eggs hatched in spring, and the new generation would lay more eggs in summer.

I should've asked them to bring the Shi clan book about bugs—and the one about medicinal herbs, while we're at it.

The more information they had, the better off they would be.

It wasn't like grasshoppers bred all year round. At the moment, the eggs laid last autumn were starting to hatch. "Fall plowing" was a good idea—it would turn up the eggs that had been hidden in the earth, which

would then become food for birds or small animals.

I think I remember Lahan talking about this. What had he called it? Multiplying like rats?

Say a single pair of rats had twelve children, for a total of fourteen rats. Assume there were six females among the children—meaning seven total, including their mother. Each of them could have another twelve babies.

This was basically an academic proposition, of course; not all of the rats were going to survive into adulthood. But grasshoppers multiplied much the same way, meaning that it was crucial to bring their numbers down as early in the cycle as possible.

If one cluster of eggs is a hundred, then ten is a thousand, and a hundred would be ten thousand. They could reduce the number of grasshoppers they had to deal with in the future by orders of magnitude if they could take care of the eggs now.

Grasshoppers liked to lay their eggs in ground that was somewhat damp. *I guess with the river right nearby and plenty of grass to eat, this is the perfect place for them.* Maybe some of the land had deliberately been left uncultivated specifically to attract the grasshoppers.

There were supposedly a number of other villages like this one scattered around I-sei Province—but how many of them were still functioning?

Nianzhen came up to Maomao, carrying a jar of grasshopper eggs. “All we have to do now is burn these.”

“Sounds good to me.”

“Mm. Last year I was late with this, and a lot of the grasshoppers got away from me.”

She did recall the farmers of the village saying that last year had been a bad one for bug damage.

“So the harvest was poor?” she asked.

Nianzhen nodded. “There was only enough for us to eat, and we have no stores. If we’d had to pay taxes on top of that, we probably would’ve starved. Then we wouldn’t have had enough left over to buy daily necessities from the merchants, so we would have had to sell off our livestock.”

“But the governor exempted you from taxes, right? In fact, he even sent you support.”

“That he did. He’s cut from good cloth, that governor,” Nianzhen said—but again he sounded like he was saying it through gritted teeth.

Maomao decided not to beat around the bush. “You don’t quite sound like you mean that, sir. May I ask what bothers you so much about him?”

“I realize a former bandit’s in no position to criticize, but these people will take anything they can get. They beg and wheedle and plead for every last bit—they’re like grasshoppers themselves. If they’re so eager not to starve, maybe they should try growing some crops! But they don’t have to bother, because they have a ‘bad harvest’ and in comes the money. What would *you* do, if you could make as much or more lazing about than by breaking your back in the fields?”

“Is that why none of the fields in this village seem well cared-for?”

“You got it. It was the same way with the grasshoppers last year. Everyone just stood by and watched the bugs ravage their fields. The village headman was only wondering how to spin it in his letter to get the most sympathy from the governor. Meanwhile, I was going from plant to plant, plucking those grasshoppers off the leaves one at a time. They thought I was a fool!”

It hardly seemed like the actions of someone who had once been the vilest of bandits. The terror of the earlier plague seemed to have left a permanent mark on Nianzhen.

No... Maybe I’m wrong.

Maybe Nianzhen had always had a diligent streak. Born and raised to brigandage, he’d learned to shoot a bow and had excelled at what he had been told was important: killing.

Logic was not, after all, something one was born with.

“Judging by how the village looks now, they must have brought in quite a lot of cash last year,” Maomao said.

“They sure did. It’s been this way for more than a decade. Always the same. They have a crop failure, the governor saves their necks. A *good, kind* governor.”

Good and kind, huh...

She wondered where all this money to support the farmers was coming from. Maybe it was excess from trade? She’d seen what a flourishing place the western capital was—there seemed to be more than enough cash going around to spare a few small coins for a farming village.

“If they’re going to spend all that money out here, it seems like an irrigation canal or two might be nice,” Maomao said.

When people had to do less physical labor hauling water, new kinds of work opened up. More fields could be developed. It would have been a

wise investment, in Maomao's eyes.

"That man Rikuson said the same thing," said Nianzhen.

"Did he?" When they got back to the capital, she would have to find out how Rikuson had learned about this former serf.

"I suppose I should apologize for making you spend all your time helping me out here," Nianzhen said. "Was there anything else you needed in this village?"

"Anything else..." Maomao rested her chin on the shaft of her hoe and closed her eyes. "Oh!"

She went over to Lahan's Brother, who wasn't just turning over the earth but was starting to build up ridges.

"Are you planning to make a field here?" she asked.

"Ack!"

His face says: Shoot! I always do that! Lahan's Brother could deny it all he liked, but he was a farmer through and through.

"Aren't you going to tell people about your potatoes? That's what you brought them for, right?"

"Yes, well, you'd think, wouldn't you?" Lahan's Brother grumbled. "But you saw these people—they aren't *actually* interested in field work. You think they'd actually bother growing potatoes if I gave them to them? I doubt they'd use their established fields to grow new crops, but they don't look like they're about to bother breaking new ground either."

"Point taken," Maomao said.

"That's why I was so eager to meet the one person around here with a decent field!"

"Oh?"

"Yeah, but there's no point giving the potatoes to the old guy."

"I guess not."

As the last of the former serfs in this village, Nianzhen had to tend to his own field as well as to the plowing for the so-called ritual. Normally, the plowing would have been finished in autumn, and here it was dragging on into spring—a clear sign of just how short of help he was.

"You don't think we could leave someone here to help?" Maomao asked, looking at the farmers they had brought from the central region.

Lahan's Brother almost seemed to think about it, but then said, "They only came all the way from the central region because I did. I can't just leave them to work the soil in a land they hardly know. It would just be too tragic, don't you think?"

“Yeah, that’s fair.”

Lahan’s Brother’s older-brotherliness could come out at the strangest times. He might have made a really good eldest son, if only he’d been born into a normal family.

“I’m just glad my dad isn’t here. He’d vow to *make* them understand the glory of potatoes, and then who knows what he’d do!”

“If you’ll excuse my saying so, I can’t picture Lahan’s Father taking matters into his own hands like that.” In Maomao’s mind, he was an easygoing, almost Luomen-esque figure. “And also... The glory of potatoes?”

“Oh, he would describe the beauty of the flowers, the shape of the leaves, the graceful, supple roots...”

“They’re *potatoes*. He could at least focus on their deliciousness.”

Maomao looked over at the siblings following Chue around. She set down her jar and went over to them.

“Say, would you like another of those potatoes?” she asked, squatting down so she was eye level with them.

“Yes, we would!”

“Want potatoes!”

The kids’ eyes sparkled.

“We’ve never ate something so sweet before! It was sweeter than raisins!”

“Raisins?” Maomao said.

“Sweets are valuable around here,” Chue interjected. “They don’t have honey, and sugar doesn’t come cheap.” She placed her large jar on her head and spun around.

So sweets are worth more here than in the central region.

“I think we can use this.” Maomao headed back to Lahan’s Brother, grinning.

There was a big hole dug behind Nianzhen’s house. It was covered in scorch marks—maybe it was normally for burning trash or something.

“This is where you burn the grasshopper eggs?” Maomao asked him.

“’S right. They don’t burn easy, so you have to add fuel.”

Presumably meaning oil or animal dung. The firewood and charcoal that Maomao and the others took for granted would almost pass for luxury products around here.

“Since we’ve got all these eggs to burn, I wouldn’t mind trying

something different," Maomao suggested.

Nianzhen gave her a look. "Whatever works. What did you have in mind?"

"Maybe I could borrow this." She touched a big pot sitting outside. It was old, but sturdy; if they got the rust off, it looked like it would be quite usable. The dry grass and dead insects inside attested to how long it had been sitting there.

"Sure. Have fun."

Maomao promptly turned the pot over and began scrubbing it with a reed scrub brush.

"Here you go, Miss Maomao!" Chue said. She had hauled water from the river, which Maomao gladly used. "That's quite a pot you've got there! Big enough to make *qingjiao rousi* for thirty people!"

"I wonder if they used it for cooking," Maomao said as she and Chue faced each other over the pot, scrubbing away.

"That was for making the serfs' rice. They'd cook up an entire day's worth at once," said Nianzhen.

"Huh! So there were plenty of serfs," said Chue. Maomao had told her Nianzhen's story, but the unusual lady-in-waiting didn't seem much bothered. It was as if it hardly mattered to her whether she was dealing with a former bandit or even a killer. "So was this a serving dish?" Chue picked up a round, metal plate.

"That's a mirror. Used to be in the shrine."

Mirrors were sometimes used for ritual purposes. This one might have been polished to a shine once upon a time, but now it was streaked with rust and reflected almost nothing.

"As long as we're polishing things, you want us to polish this?" Chue said, rubbing it with her arm.

"Sure, if you would. Haven't had time myself."

Perhaps the serfs had shared the duty of polishing it, once again in some long-ago time, but it was simply too much for Nianzhen to get to by himself.

How much do the villagers really know? Maomao wondered. They seemed to treat Nianzhen as an eccentric, but they weren't openly hostile toward him. Nor did they seem particularly worried about an insect plague. Was it possible the villagers were pretty laid-back?

Maomao couldn't stop herself from musing, "Wonder if this village would survive if it was ever hit by bandits."

She was speaking almost to herself, but Chue chirped, “Oh, they would be fine! They might be settled now, but they used to be nomads. They have bows and swords in their huts, all strung and sharpened and ready to go. Plus they know the terrain—you’d have to be a very brave bandit to attack this place!”

“That explains why they go after travelers instead,” Maomao said.

What did ever happen to that guide of ours?

It seemed like it might be better left unthought-about, but there was something she had to ask. “Why did you decide to have us be the bait, Miss Chue? Master Basen didn’t seem like he knew what you were planning, and it would be unlike the Moon Prince to order us to do something like that.”

Jinshi seemed to be quite alert to Maomao’s safety these days—even Basen’s presence as their bodyguard seemed like an act of consideration from him.

Chue narrowed her already small eyes, making them even smaller. “My orders were to minimize risk. And isn’t it safer to know when and where you’ll be attacked, rather than not having any idea when the enemy will strike?”

So Chue had been thinking of safety too, in her own way.

“All right, but I think normally you try to *hide* how much danger people are in. It makes them less jumpy.”

“I know you’ve got a lot of guts, Miss Maomao. Anyway, I thought maybe you’d appreciate the more logical approach.”

“I just want to say for the record that if someone punched me, I would die.”

“Understood and duly noted! But if we need anyone to survive any poisons, you’ll be up!”

Chue certainly knew who was good for what.

As they chatted, the pot got progressively cleaner. Nianzhen was doing some other work nearby.

“What would you like us to do with this? I mean, with this pot?” Chue called.

“Put the grasshopper eggs in it,” he replied.

Chue recoiled with almost comical intensity. “Miss Maomao...”

“No, no, Miss Chue, don’t worry. We’re not going to eat them. I promise.”

“You *promise* promise?” Chue still didn’t look like she believed her.

“Yes. They don’t look very tasty, do they? And they’re disgusting. We should know, we gathered them.” Mature bugs she had eaten, but even she would say no to insect eggs. “We’ll pour oil on these—”

“And fry them?”

“And burn them.”

“Burn them?”

Maomao took the pot and headed toward the shrine. It was of modest brick construction, but if it were cleaned and decorated it would be suitably imposing.

“I say we light a fire here. That seems ritual-ish, doesn’t it?” Maomao asked.

“Oh-ho,” said Chue.

“And a ritual needs a feast, right?” Maomao looked at the kids from the village, who were still hanging around. Word about the potatoes must’ve traveled, because there was a small crowd in addition to the brother and sister.

“*I* see what you’re getting at.” Chue laughed. She saw where Maomao was going with this—good. “You just leave the decorations to me!” She pulled a length of red ribbon from her collar. “We’ll need a platform for our lovely pot. I’ll get Lahan’s Brother and my little brother-in-law to help!”

Apparently, Chue now also called him “Lahan’s Brother.”

Chue focused on building the platform, so Maomao was left to prepare the meal. She borrowed the oven in Nianzhen’s house to whip something up. Maomao sometimes felt like she was standing in En’en’s pro-chef shadow, but the fact was, she wasn’t a half-bad cook herself.

Cooking is basically just like mixing up drugs, but with food. You put the ingredients and the garnishes together to make something tasty.

“What’re you doing?” Nianzhen asked, narrowing his remaining eye.

“Ritual.”

“How’s that again?”

“Rituals are supposed to be joyous celebrations, are they not, sir? And for that, you need a feast.”

“I suppose you’ve got me there...” He looked uneasy; his gaze settled on Lahan’s Brother.

“Stop! Don’t use *all* of them! I only brought so many, you know!”

What was “them”? The seed potatoes, of course. They had decided to

make this festival a big one.

"I know, I know. Less whining, more steaming!"

"You can't talk to people like—Grr!"

Lahan's Brother grumbled angrily to himself, but he put more fuel in the stove. He was using two sticks to pick it up—maybe he felt an instinctive resistance to handling sheep dung with his bare hands, even if it was dried.

"You can use whatever tools I have around my house. If you use up my food, I'd appreciate if you could spare me a few coins for it. I live right on the edge," Nianzhen said.

"Thank you, sir," Maomao said.

"I'm going to get some sleep," said Nianzhen, lying down on the crude bed. He looked hardy, but he was an old man, and days on end of work in the fields took their toll.

"Sweet potatoes get their sweetest when slow-cooked, right?" Maomao asked.

"Yes! You can't just roast them over a big, hot flame!"

So it's not just potato farming he's so well-versed in. It's potato cooking too.

It looked like Lahan had been relying in no small measure on Lahan's Brother to dream up ways to use sweet potatoes. Lahan's Brother could be rough on his younger sibling, but he was fundamentally a decent person—too decent. The way he made a point of pushing back at everything suggested an ordinary but belated rebellious phase.

"I'm not a very versatile cook. What do you think we can make with the ingredients on hand here?" Maomao asked.

"Why are you asking me?!"

"Because Miss Chue is more the eating type, and Master Basen won't be any help."

Chue seemed like she might have been able to make congee, if she really had to, but when it came to more elaborate dishes, she was focused on consumption rather than production.

"Well, I don't know," Lahan's Brother said flatly. He looked away from her, but he was obviously lying.

"I see," said Maomao. "I'm sorry... I was just hoping to treat them to something they'd really enjoy."

She looked back, toward the door, where children were peeking in. The crowd of kids accompanying the brother and sister had grown to

substantial proportions.

"Oh, look at all your friends," she said, uncharacteristically speaking directly to the children. "I'll bet you were all hoping you could have something special. Something delicious."

"What?" asked the sister, on the verge of tears. "You mean... You mean we don't get to eat potatoes?"

"Oh, you will, you will. It's just... I'm sorry. I won't be able to make them taste very good by myself."

"Why? Are you bad at cooking?" asked another kid.

"Aw, I wish we could have potatoes. Doesn't sound like we'll get any," a third child said mournfully.

Lahan's Brother looked increasingly uncomfortable. He hunched, he kept his back to them—but only for a moment. Then he sighed a long sigh, turned, and raised a finger. "Listen, you little brats. You want food, help with the cooking. Those who don't work, don't eat. But those who do work—I'll treat you to the best food you've ever had!"

The children cheered, and Lahan's Brother proved he was the ultimate eldest son.

What a soft touch! Maomao thought as she speared a potato in the steamer on her chopsticks.

By the time Maomao and her crew were done cooking, the shrine had been fully decorated. Chue had placed the pot full of grasshopper eggs smack in the middle, atop a small but well-constructed pile of bricks that served as an impromptu platform.

The modest shrine was festooned with red banners, and animal-lard lamps glowed here and there. There was a clanging of metal; Maomao looked toward the sound to discover two metal plates had been tied together to create a clapper. When the wind blew through, it rattled the cymbals and made the banners flutter.

The chair and tables, such as they were, consisted of barrels covered in felt. The "table" was piled with the food Maomao and the others had made.

By the time everything was ready, the sun was already brushing the western horizon.

"What all's going on here?" someone asked. It wasn't just kids anymore—the adults had started to show up as well.

Once everyone was there, Maomao poured oil into the huge pot. Then

they lit a fire, using dried grass to get it started.

There was a whiff of an aroma that might have been pleasant or might have been stomach turning; it was hard to tell. The pot began to burn brilliantly, accentuated by the gathering darkness.

"What are you, ahem, doing, esteemed visitors?" the village headman asked, perplexed. Several of the other villagers were with him.

"Allow me to explain," said Basen, stepping forward. Chue came up beside him and briefly showed him a piece of paper.

Cue cards!

Thankfully, the villagers didn't notice.

"This village was founded long ago in order to carry out a ritual," Basen said.

"Yes, we've heard of it," the headman said. "You mean the 'ritual' of turning up the earth that no one understands. Only Nianzhen does it now."

"That's correct. And I'm well aware that you don't understand it. The reason we have come to you this day is to bring to you the full and proper form of the ritual, which you knew only in part, but which we now give to you in whole."

Very profound.

Basen was reciting from a script, and he sounded like it, but, backlit by the fire, he still managed to look important, maybe even sacred. Chue was well prepared; she had a whole sheaf of paper, from which she selected appropriate lines based on the villagers' reactions.

She really knows how to handle her little brother.

Lahan's Brother was holding the duck in his arms: having it waddling around behind Basen might spoil the reverential image they were trying to create.

Lahan's Brother nudged Maomao. "Is that true?" he hissed. The moment was so convincingly manufactured that he had been taken in along with the audience.

"It is now. Try to play along."

"Wait... It's *not* true?" He looked scandalized. Meanwhile, Basen continued to speak with the villagers.

"Have you really? I see you're prepared to conduct the ritual right now...but may I ask you a question first?" the headman ventured.

"What would you like to know?"

"It's only Nianzhen who's been entrusted with this duty, isn't it? The rest of us were summoned here by the governor as settlers—we weren't

told of any ritual."

There was a great *crack* from inside the pot.

The headman seemed to be saying that the visitors were more than welcome to conduct their rite, but the villagers had no intention of joining in. By the look on his face it was clear he thought Basen was trying to push something on him, and he didn't want it.

Chue stopped hopping around for a thoughtful second, then showed Basen another cue card.

"I understand your objection. It need not be you who conducts the ritual." Basen looked at Maomao. From behind him, Chue gave her a broad wink. "But may I take it, then, that you don't care what happens as a result?"

Basen pointed directly at Maomao. (This was also at Chue's direction.)

They're trying to pass the buck to me! He seemed to be indicating that they would leave the ritual to Maomao, but that was more than she had signed on for. *What the hell do they want me to do?!*

Still, she had to roll with it. She walked forward one slow, solemn step at a time, toward the big pot.

There has to be something I can try. Some little bluff, something to pull the wool over their eyes...

Maomao placed her hands in front of her chest, which gave her a chance to dig through the folds of her robes. She didn't keep as much in there as Chue did, but she had some herbs and sewing tools. She walked as slowly as she could and tried to come up with a script. Finally she arrived in front of the cauldron, where she bowed her head.

"This fire carries our offerings to the gods. There was a time, once, when other humans were our sacrifices, but the gods spoke to us and revealed that this was not the manner of sacrifice they desired."

She'd cribbed the words from a novel that had been popular in the rear palace. It had sounded even more high-flying in the original, but she couldn't remember all the words.

"The god of this land takes the form of a bird; therefore it was decreed that the deity should be given an offering in accordance with the preferred sustenance of its manifestation."

She'd spotted one of the chickens sleeping in the shed.

"A bird deity? But we worship a god of the pasture..."

"*What*? You mean after all this time as farmers, you still worship your *old* god?" Chue asked, making sure to lay it on thick. "That would explain

it! Now I see why your wheat grows so poorly. Let me guess—it gets worse every year, doesn't it? Well, who can blame it, when the people who live here don't even worship the god of these parts?"

That set the villagers muttering among themselves. It was true, Maomao suspected, that the harvest got worse and worse—with such listless cultivation, the land itself would decline. Unlike wet rice cultivation, grain needed soil that had been well cared-for, or the crop would wither.

I think this is going well?

It seemed rather promising. Until:

"That's a lot of nonsense. I think the land is just exhausted. All this talk of gods—who knows if they even exist?" one of the village youth called out.

Come on, have a little faith! Maomao thought—never mind her own attitude.

Other villagers started to speak up:

"We've been here all this time. Why bring up gods and rituals now?"

"Yeah, we don't need a good harvest, anyway—not with such a compassionate and generous governor watching over us!"

"He's right! We don't know if the gods exist—but we sure know the governor does, and we know he'll watch out for us!"

There was a general murmur of agreement.

Believe only what you can see. Uh-huh. Fair enough. Maomao sympathized; she couldn't say she would have done any different in their place. But she had a job to do.

Maomao bowed her head and laughed. "Heh heh!"

"What's so funny?" one of the villagers demanded.

"Why, nothing. Only, you all seem to be laboring under a misunderstanding. Allow me to reiterate: *it need not be you who conducts the ritual*," she said, repeating Basen's words. Then she turned her back to the villagers, taking the opportunity to rifle through the folds of her robe. She was careful not to let any of them see her.

Let's see. What we need is...

She gave a great flourish of her hands, and the flame in the cauldron whooshed and danced.

"Look! The fire!" someone exclaimed.

The flames had turned yellow.

"What is this?!"

Maomao had more than just medicinal herbs stashed in her robes—she also carried disinfectant alcohol. Not to mention she still had a pinch of the salt from cooking earlier. Chue kept some with her—she'd explained it was a luxury item around here.

Ahh, this takes me back.

The same thing had once been behind a mystery in the rear palace: salt burned yellow.

"Can you not see the god's will?" Maomao picked up the mirror housed in the shrine. Chue had polished it, somewhat, but only enough to get off the worst of the rust.

That's perfect, though.

She dribbled some alcohol on the mirror and transferred some of the fire from the pot to its surface. Now the fire burned blue-green.

Maomao turned and put on her "business" smile.

"It appears the god is angry, and grieved."

The bronze mirror was growing quite warm with the fire on it, so she set it beside the pot.

A buzz started among the villagers when they saw the color-changing flames.

"Now, I realize that you will not participate in the ritual." She looked at the meal set out on the barrel. "But we seem to have made somewhat too much food tonight. Won't you all have some before it goes cold?"

"Yippee!" the kids said, throwing their hands in the air. It wouldn't be right to make them help all day and then not give them any food.

The adults were more hesitant, intimidated by the colorful fire—but they were undeniably drawn to the unusual food, the likes of which they'd never seen before. When everyone was looking at the table, Maomao nudged Chue. "Don't put me on the spot like that again," she muttered. Frankly, she'd broken into a cold sweat.

"I had faith that you could do it, Miss Maomao," Chue said innocently, and then with a smile she jumped in to join the general melee over the feast.

I sure hope it works.

Maomao was exhausted. She decided to let Chue and the others handle things from here—she would go back to the tent to get some rest.

Chapter 10: Results Reported

The air was rich with the smell of tea and sweet snacks. The host of this tea party had skin as smooth as a babe's, and the room was suffused with pleasant chatter.

By this description, perhaps you're picturing a tea party full of vibrant young women—but you would be wrong.

"Hullo, young lady! Welcome home!"

The host of this gathering was an older man—a eunuch at that. Namely, it was the quack doctor. He was chatting away with Tianyu, popping dried jujubes into his mouth in between bits of chitchat. Lihaku stood by the wall, keeping watch, but it must have been pretty quiet, because he had some walnuts and was discreetly cracking the shells when he had a chance.

Are those our medicinal walnuts? Maomao thought, but she decided to start by greeting the physician.

"Thank you. I've just returned. I see it's starting to look like a real medical office around here."

The office, really a converted building in Gyokuen's annex, had more shelves and cots than it had before, and even partitioning screens.

Maomao had been away from the medical office for a good ten days visiting the village, and she was glad to discover that the others appeared to have been doing real work while she was gone.

"We got more furniture for your room too, young lady. Don't worry, it's right where you left it."

"All right, thank you."

Ten days earlier, her quarters had contained nothing but a cot. She hoped they had at least found her a desk and a bookshelf.

"Don't worry, we didn't touch any of your belongings," the quack said. "I just straightened up a little. Your room did look so sad and empty. I think it should be much nicer to be in now!"

He sounded unusually motivated. The message Maomao got was that he'd had enough time on his hands to redecorate.

"The baby-faced wonder here *really* got into making the place feel like home," said Tianyu, no more reverent than usual. Maomao was getting a very bad feeling about this.

“I take this to mean there were no serious issues?” she asked as she set down her baggage and started going through the drawers of the new medicine cabinet. It gladdened her heart to smell medicine that actually *smelled* like medicine for the first time in so long. She’d also successfully obtained the seahorse from Basen; she would have to process it later.

“Hmm, no, not to speak of,” the quack said. “We just kept conducting the Moon Prince’s exams. We saw a patient every once in a while...”

“Mostly just common colds. The temperature swings on the ship left some people weak.” Tianyu, frustrated by the quack’s relaxed, roundabout way of speaking, jumped in. Maomao was just as happy to get the story as directly as possible, so her gaze flitted between Tianyu and the medicine cabinet as she continued to check their inventory. “We had one person who got stung by a scorpion, but he was fine. A guy with him treated him right after the sting, so it sounds like he wasn’t going to die, even if he acted like he was.”

Tianyu related this like a secondhand story, probably because this field wasn’t his specialty. Certainly the quack hadn’t treated the man—so who had? Was it someone who knew something about scorpion venom?

“Do we have someone with us who knows about scorpion venom?” Maomao took some swertia from a drawer, tore off a piece, and licked it. She immediately regretted it: it was cringe-inducingly bitter, although the flavor certainly did say *medicine*.

“They deal with scorpion venom all the time around here. One of the ladies at the dining hall told us how to treat it. And, I might add, wondered aloud if we were really doctors.”

“Did you know they fry scorpions and *eat* them here?” the quack said. “What a frightening idea!” His brow creased.

“We’ve got to make sure we try that!” Maomao said, her morale jumping. She put the dried herbs back in the drawer. She was eager to find out if the grass she’d collected on the trip had any medicinal properties.

“What? No, no!” the quack said, shivering.

Judging by the two physicians, Maomao decided, everything looked all right. She wanted to spend a bit more quality time with the medicine, but a nagging doubt led her to go to her room. “I’m going to go put my stuff down,” she said.

Her room was right at the top of the stairs, and as soon as she entered, she understood why Tianyu had been snickering.

“What in the *name* of...”

Her formerly plain, unadorned chamber now boasted a cherry-pink canopy over the bed. It was far too cute to be bug netting, plus it was embroidered here and there. Her desk was covered with a tablecloth (also embroidered), and her chair had a western-style, openwork lace cushion. Curtains in much the same style hung at the window, and a flower-pattern tapestry decorated the wall.

She smelled incense too, a floral fragrance much too girlish for her. To top it all off, dried flowers had been scattered here and there around the room.

For a second she stared in absolute silence, then she began to shake. She would have liked to tear down the decor right then and there, but the quack had trailed up behind her and was looking at her expectantly.

"Ah! You're appreciating the needlework, aren't you? The merchant promised me it would be perfect for a young lady," he said. And maybe it would. But this was Maomao they were talking about. Who, agewise, by the way, was practically an old maid. "What do you think, miss? Do you like it?" The quack came over to her, his eyes glistening with hope.

Maomao made a slight choking sound. She frowned mightily, and then her shoulders slumped. Behind them, Lihaku looked on sympathetically, while Tianyu grinned. Maomao resolved to put swertia in his tea that evening.

After dinner, Maomao returned to her room, feeling a little better since she'd been able to get Tianyu back good and proper. The way his face puckered when he drank the swertia tea—well, you didn't see that every day.

What's he so upset about? It's medicinal!

In the pleasure district, they had mixed swertia into the eyebrow black; it was reputed to prevent hair thinning. It was also effective against indigestion, diarrhea, and stomach pains, but it was so bitter that it was rarely used at the court medical office.

Why did they have it with them, then? It had less to do with the gastric side of things and more to do with the hair-loss prevention. People liked that part of it.

We do get people who come in about hair matters once in a while.

Of course, Maomao didn't give out personal information, unlike the quack, but she wasn't above taking the opportunity to ask a patient for a favor in exchange.

Maomao could only sigh at the overwhelmingly girlish room. If she just put everything back the way it had been, the quack would be sad. She would have to change things a little bit at a time so he didn't notice.

Maybe she would start tomorrow, though. It sounded like a lot of work right now. She was just changing into her sleepwear when she heard a knock at the door.

"Come in?" she said.

"And a very good evening to you!"

Chue appeared, now dressed in an ordinary lady-in-waiting's outfit rather than the trousers she'd worn on their trip. "Our dear quack has done his exam, and now the ladies-in-waiting would like theirs!" In other words, Jinshi was summoning Maomao. Chue offered her pretext without batting an eye.

It's been ten days...

Maomao wondered how Jinshi's injury was doing. It should have been fine without her, as long as he wasn't scratching.

"He's very interested in how things went at the farming village," Chue said.

"I would have assumed you'd already filled him in," said Maomao. Between Chue and Basen, surely there wasn't much she could add.

"Ah, but the Moon Prince likes to get all kinds of perspectives. Different standpoints bring different viewpoints!"

"I suppose you're not wrong..."

It was a good philosophy, but in that case, Maomao thought he would be better off summoning Lahan's Brother. Then again, unlike the rest of them, Maomao suspected Jinshi wouldn't be able to tolerate him.

They'd probably have a whole conversation and never get anything said.

Anyway, if this was a direct order, then Maomao had no choice but to go. Looked like she was going to have to change her clothes again.

Chue bounced ahead of Maomao with a lamp, the light bobbing along with her, illuminating the space around them at weird angles.

"Creepy place, huh! Nothing like a big, old mansion in the middle of the night!"

"Too true..." Maomao thought back to her days in the rear palace, to the spooky stories and the consort who'd danced upon the outer wall. She'd found herself going out at night quite a bit, as a matter of fact.

“You know, they say there’s an apparition in this house,” Chue said, holding the lantern in front of her face.

“An apparition? Oh,” was all Maomao said.

Chue poked out her lower lip. “Aww, aren’t you even a little scared, Miss Maomao?”

“I’ve heard a lot of those kinds of stories.” No point being scared now. Chue, though, still looked like Maomao had spoiled her fun. So Maomao said, “Just for my reference, what kind of apparitions are they?”

“Ooh! Would you like to know? Would you like to know, Miss Maomao?” Chue’s eyes began to shine. “It shows up right here, it’s said!”

“*What* shows up?”

“A flying head!”

“Huh?”

That made no sense. A head was, you know, a head. They didn’t fly.

“There’s a *feitouman* around here!”

A feitouman—okay, yes, Maomao had heard of those. They were a kind of supernatural monster said to look like a head that flew around of its own accord.

“Aw, Miss Maomao. You don’t look like you believe me.”

“That’s because I don’t think there’s any feitouman around here. You were kind of hoping though, weren’t you, Miss Chue?”

They soon arrived safely at Jinshi’s chambers with no monsters in sight.

“Boo. Boring,” Chue said.

“I know, I know. Let’s do what we came here for.”

They bowed to the door guard, whose name Maomao didn’t know, and entered the room. By this point, the sumptuousness of the accommodations could be taken as given. Suiren and Gaoshun were inside.

“Good evening,” Maomao said with another bow. She looked around the room. *Kind of lonely in here*, she thought. Not many people around. She assumed Jinshi was within, but she didn’t see Taomei or Basen. Baryou might have been there or he might not. Chue was nudging a nearby curtain, so maybe he was over there.

“Taomei is busy giving Basen a talking to,” Suiren said, answering Maomao’s question as she prepared tea.

I didn’t even ask! The old lady-in-waiting was just that sharp. She knew exactly what Maomao was thinking. *I don’t think he noticeably screwed up at the village, though.*

If anything, she thought Basen seemed more mature than he had been before. He seemed to have developed a bit of a nervous streak, but she assumed he had a lot on his plate.

"Cute or not, he just can't have a duck in his room," Suiren added.

The duck? That's what this is about?

At least she knew what was up now. It looked like Basen hadn't succeeded in leaving the bird with Lahan's Brother, who had stayed behind in the farming village to teach them some actual farming.

"Now, Xiaomao, would you be so kind as to take this to the Moon Prince?" asked Suiren, handing her the tray of tea with a bright smile.

"If it's all right that I do so," she said. Gaoshun nodded, indicating no problem. Jinshi's put-upon attendant clutched a single white feather in his hand. Gaoshun always did like adorable things. The duck must have had a restorative effect on him.

All of the people in the room at that moment knew, basically, what was going on with Jinshi—except for the lackadaisical Chue. She was on her best behavior at the moment, presumably because Suiren was there.

"Very well, then." Maomao turned toward the inner chamber. When she opened the door, the air carried a bracing smell of incense that tickled her nostrils. Jinshi often preferred sandalwood, but today he was using aloeswood.

I'm sure he's got the best stuff money can buy. Aloeswood had medicinal properties and Maomao would have loved to get her hands on some, but the incense Jinshi was using was probably dizzyingly expensive. She couldn't just beg him to share a bit of it.

"Is that you, Maomao?" Jinshi was bent over his desk, writing something. He was surrounded by papers.

"Yes, sir." Maomao set the tray on the table and poured the tea. Suiren had used boiling water, so by the time Maomao got settled it was perfectly steeped. She poured two cups equally full and took one for herself. "If I may."

She took a sip. She didn't actually think Suiren would have prepared poisoned tea, but protocol was protocol. She discovered a richly fermented black tea that not only wet the throat but promoted blood flow.

"Here you are."

"Thanks." Jinshi put down his brush and gave a great stretch.

"How has your health been, sir?"

"Cutting right to the chase, are we? Ah, well, that's all right. You can

tell me about the trip while you do your exam."

Jinshi shrugged out of the top of his robe. Maomao felt like he used to be a little slower to do that, but having been subjected to so many exams by now, he no longer hesitated. She couldn't afford to stand on ceremony either, so she summarily removed his bandage.

"I see you've gotten good at changing the dressings," she said.

"Well, do something every day..."

A perfect crimson flower bloomed on Jinshi's flank. New skin was forming over the burn, turning it a bright red, like a rose or a peony. Maomao might even have admired the beauty of it, if she hadn't known that it was politically motivated.

I'd say it's just about better. The scar would likely never heal completely—it would fade from red to pink, but probably not much more than that. *Man. I wish I could take some skin from his butt and stick it on this thing.* She spared a glance at Jinshi's haunches.

"You know, I can't help thinking you seem to look as much at my back as my front during our exams lately," Jinshi said.

"It's your imagination, sir."

Maomao put fresh salve on Jinshi's side, less to treat the burn than to keep the skin from drying out. Eventually she planned to start adding some herbs that would remove blemishes.

"There, all done."

She applied a fresh bandage, and that was the extent of Jinshi's treatment. It was over so quickly that the tea was still steaming. Maomao helped herself to a sip.

"It does go so much quicker when you do it," Jinshi said. He pulled his robe back on and drank down the tea on the table. When Maomao moved to pour him a second cup, he gestured for her not to bother. Instead he took a book from the desk and sat down on his bed.

"You seem very busy," she observed.

"Mostly because I'm still figuring out what I'm doing here. A new land means much to learn." So it was study rather than work that kept him occupied. "Give me your report," he said. Apparently he meant to listen while he read his book. A necessary evil for the time-starved.

"How much detail do you want, sir?"

"I want every opinion and observation you can give me. Don't skimp on the details just because I've heard from Basen and Chue already."

"Yes, sir. In that case, I—"

Jinshi interrupted her, patting the bed beside him.

Maomao didn't say anything.

"It would be tiring for you to stand there the whole time we're talking. Have a seat."

"Certainly. I'll go get a chair..."

She was about to do just that, but Jinshi grabbed her wrist. He was giving her his bring-the-country-to-its-knees smile. "*Have a seat.*" Just when she'd thought he was behaving himself today.

Maomao was left with little choice but to sit down beside Jinshi. There, she began to relate the story of their visit to the village. Telling someone else about it gave her a chance to organize things in her own mind. She described how the bandits had attacked them on the road. She talked about the farmers who showed no particular desire to work. Explained the Windreader tribe and the serfs.

She even mentioned the Yi clan.

Jinshi seemed to be mentally comparing what she said with what he had heard from the other two. Often he nodded; sometimes he would give a tilt of his head, as if something seemed off to him.

"I think that's all I can tell you, sir. Do you have any questions?"

"Mm. I think the thing that bothers me most would be the Windreader tribe."

"I know what you mean. A tribe of ritual celebrants who wander the plains, controlling birds and plowing the earth?"

"Controlling birds..." Jinshi seemed fixated on the same thing that had gotten Maomao's attention.

"Are we very sure the birds in question aren't ducks, sir?" Maomao asked.

"Yes. I feel a bit bad, doing that to Basen..."

Basen was currently in his mother Taomei's bad books on account of that duck. As it was Jinshi who had originally ordered him to raise the animals, he felt a certain measure of guilt. Moreover, it seemed he'd instructed Taomei to nudge her son now and again to get him to keep his distance during Jinshi's examinations. Everyone was concerned that if Basen, not the most subtle of men, were to find out about the brand, he might not be able to keep the secret.

"What kind of bird do you think they used?" asked Jinshi. Basen had been convinced it must be ducks, but Maomao had another idea.

"Perhaps pigeons," she said.

Maomao had been in the western capital before, a year ago. On that trip, former consort Lishu had been attacked, and the means of coordinating that attack had been messenger pigeons.

That's how the White Lady did it.

She couldn't help wondering if there was some connection.

"Yes, pigeons. I had the same thought." Jinshi got up from the bed and disappeared behind a partitioning screen, from which he emerged carrying a birdcage with a bird sleeping inside.

"You have a pigeon right here," Maomao observed.

"So I do. I've started using them for simple communications."

Jinshi looked older than his twenty-one years, but he was still young enough to be adaptable in his thinking; he took in new things quickly.

"It's been twenty days or so since we got here, and I've done nothing but attend banquets and make official greetings. But that's provided opportunities to gather intelligence."

Jinshi began to fill Maomao in on what he'd been up to while she was away. The bird was soundly asleep, ignoring the millet in its food bowl.

Jinshi told her about all his dinners with the western capital's upper crust, how he had been shown every important site in the area, and even how some VIP had occasionally approached him on behalf of their daughter or a relative.

"We just missed Sir Gyoku-ou's daughter—she was leaving for the capital when our party arrived," he said.

"Ahh, yes."

"He asked if I wanted her for my wife, but he pretended to be joking."

"Of course, sir."

Maomao studiously kept any emotion out of her voice. Jinshi responded by tugging on her cheeks.

"I meab, moth brazen, thir."

"I agree." He let go, and Maomao rubbed her cheeks.

"What do you mean to do?" she asked.

"I started by sending a letter to Empress Gyokuyou immediately. I have her response here."

"Already, sir? I thought the round trip took at least a month."

Jinshi took out a letter and showed it to her. It was in a pretty sad state for a missive from the Empress.

"You used a pigeon," Maomao said.

"Only one way."

It seemed Jinshi was willing to let her read the letter, so Maomao took a peek. “She says to let her handle things with her niece.”

That was the gist of it, anyway. If Gyoku-ou was indeed Empress Gyokuyou’s half-brother, then his daughter would be her niece.

What is she planning to do, I wonder...

The Empress didn’t exactly seem to be on the best of terms with her half-brother. She had her own designs, Maomao was sure. Meanwhile, Maomao and the others had to confront the problem that was in front of them.

“If the Windreaders were using pigeons, it would lend credence to that man Nianzhen’s story,” Jinshi said.

“You think the Windreaders were able to share information on the plains?”

“They would have to be. Insect plagues are like fires—the problem is getting to them the moment they start.”

Jinshi tossed Maomao the book he’d been reading—and she discovered it wasn’t text, but contained columns of numbers. Records of some sort.

“These are the plagues that have occurred over the last several decades. Lahan would have the numbers figured out in an instant, but it’s been harder for me.”

The records gave locations, followed by numbers relating to the swarms. It was enough to give anyone who wasn’t a specialist a headache.

“You think there’s some kind of pattern, sir? Something insidious?”

“I couldn’t be sure from the harvest records alone, but thanks to your inspection, I know now. I-sei Province is falsely reporting inflated harvest numbers.”

“Inflated? I don’t understand. Why would they do that?”

Normally, higher numbers would only mean higher taxes. If they’d been underreporting their harvests—that, she would have understood.

“I don’t know yet. But if natural disasters are occurring in places not mentioned in the records, then all these pages are useless.” Jinshi shook his head, hopeless. “The only way to know for sure is to go see it for yourself. Not just the village you visited; others too.”

It wasn’t easy for the Imperial younger brother, however. Though he was still within his own borders, in this far land he was less powerful than at home, and there were fewer people at his disposal.

“Anything else jump out at you?” he asked.

“Maybe one thing...”

“Yes? What?”

“There aren’t very many medicinal herbs around here, sir.” She looked straight at Jinshi, even allowing some of her annoyance to show on her face. “I’d like an encyclopedia of local plants. There will be a limit to how many medicines I can make using only what we’ve brought from home.”

The easiest thing would be for Maomao to go to a bookstore herself, but it didn’t look like she would have the chance. Surely she wouldn’t get in trouble for asking him to take care of a little errand.

“Very well. Any other questions?”

“May I ask something of a personal nature?”

“Go ahead.”

“Who *were* the Yi clan?”

This was pure curiosity on Maomao’s part. She knew the Yi had been annihilated seventeen years before on the orders of the empress regnant, but she didn’t know what they had done.

“The Yi clan... Hmm,” Jinshi muttered.

“What is it, sir? Is it something you can’t talk about?”

“It’s not so much that. I’m just not sure myself. I know that they served the throne alongside the Shi clan since the days of the Mother Royal. And I’ve heard that they followed a system of matrilineal descent.”

The “Mother Royal,” Wang Mu, was the woman who had founded Li, according to legend. She was sometimes said to be the mother of the first emperor.

“Matrilineal, sir?”

Maomao was surprised. Patriarchalism tended to be the order of the day in Li, and she would have expected that tendency to be even stronger in I-sei Province, which was home to so many nomadic tribes.

“Yes, that’s right. An informant revealed the Yi’s treachery, and so they were destroyed. One theory has it that they had unduly influenced the Imperial family...but Gaoshun tells me even he doesn’t know for sure.”

“Even Master Gaoshun doesn’t know?”

“No. I tried looking into records from that era, but they’re so compressed and superficial that there was no point.”

That seemed strange. Sloppy, even. Jinshi’s refusal to be definite might have suggested how much rumor and hearsay there was in what he was telling her.

“I see, sir.” She cleaned up the salve and gathered the used bandages.

“You’re going already?” Jinshi clenched his fists and looked at her like

a sad puppy.

"Yes, sir. I've come almost straight from my trip, myself, and I'm very tired. I wish you would let me get some sleep."

"In that case..." Jinshi started, but then he shook his head.

"What is it, sir?"

Maomao had a very good guess what it was, but she pretended not to know.

"No, better not. After a major violation of the rules, even a small transgression is looked upon harshly."

A violation of the rules, huh? Maomao looked at Jinshi's side. *Maybe I'm not being very fair.*

Jinshi was a man who could have had anything and everything he desired. And yet, he was such a straight shooter that it caused him to beat around the bush like this. He didn't want to take the shortest route to what he wanted, but the one that would be best for the other person.

Too bad that doesn't exist here.

So it was that Maomao pretended not to know, even though she did. Not fair of her at all.

"In that case, I'll be going, sir."

She tried to make herself smile a little, to take the edge off her unfairness.

Jinshi's arm was still outstretched, but he didn't get off the bed.

Chue walked Maomao back to her room. She didn't tell any ghost stories this time; instead, she complained about the stern talking-to that Suiren had given her while Maomao was busy with Jinshi.

"Phew! Who *cleans* in the middle of the night? No one, that's who! What do you think, Miss Maomao?"

Chue, Maomao found out, had been forced to polish the floor.

Sorry, Miss Chue...

It had probably been a convenient way of preventing Chue from bursting into Jinshi's room. Suiren was, as ever, Jinshi's ally.

Chue was respectful enough not to ask any questions about what had gone on while Maomao and Jinshi had been alone together, so apparently she knew something about where the line was for a lady-in-waiting. Even if the way she looked and acted suggested exactly the opposite.

"Once I drop you off, Miss Maomao, I'll be going back to my room. Hanky-panky with my husband can wait for another day."

"Miss Chue, we don't share the intimate details of our conjugal lives

with other people."

"But this stuff isn't anything new to you, is it?"

"It's not; that's true."

Maomao had had to stand guard during the Emperor and Empress's "hanky-panky," not to mention everything the ladies of the pleasure district got up to with their customers. Frankly, she was more accustomed to human hanky-panky than insect copulation.

"Then why worry about—" Chue and Maomao were just turning the corner of the hallway when what looked like a white mask darted in front of them.

"Wha?!"

Maomao's brain didn't process it at first. It looked like a floating, grinning face.

"Miss Maomao?" asked Chue, who had been turned toward her. She quickly realized something was amiss and spun around, bringing the lamp to bear. Then she set off running after the white mask, with Maomao close behind.

When Maomao caught up with Chue, she was dangling from the branches of the big tree in the central courtyard. "I'm real sorry! I lost track of it!" she drawled. Then she hopped down, her hair full of leaves. "Wow! Who knew they really had ghosts here?" She looked downright intrigued. "So that's a feitouman."

Maomao had certainly never expected to witness one herself, but based on all the descriptions, that was certainly what they seemed to have on their hands. A genuine flying head.

Chapter 11: The Feitouman (Part 1)

The feitouman, the flying head, had first appeared about two months ago. The first person to witness it was a manservant. He'd finished his work and was ambling under the moonlight when he saw something pale float into view. He looked closer and discovered it was a white mask.

The man assumed it was someone playing a trick, but he was too tired for pranks just then. He was about to just walk by—when the mask turned and looked at him. Startled, then terrified, the man ran away.

The next morning, when he was feeling calmer, the man realized he must have just been seeing things. But when he went to where he'd seen the mask the night before, he found no trace of anything.

After that, other people started reporting the mysterious mask too. Some said they'd turned toward a strange noise to find the mask grinning at them; others, that it had been floating through the air.

Finally, more recently, stories started circulating of a woman's disembodied head flying through the mansion—which inspired some to say that it must be a feitouman.

"So you saw it too, little lady?" Lihaku asked around a mouthful of congee.

Maomao was at the medical office eating with the others, and over breakfast she'd told them what she had seen the night before.

"Huh! What were you doing wandering around the house in the middle of the night, Niangniang?" Leave it to Tianyu to spoil a perfectly good conversation. His meal consisted entirely of some juice; it seemed he was not a morning person.

"Yes! Who knows what might be lurking out there at night? If you can't sleep, you should at least stay in your room," said the quack doctor, who'd prepared himself a hearty breakfast of congee, goat's milk, and fried bread.

"Sorry. It was sort of...spur of the moment. Miss Chue invited me."

Maomao's apology didn't sound especially apologetic. She was still tired from traveling, and on top of that she'd gotten back late from her evening excursion and then witnessed this "flying head." In the end she'd

hardly gotten any sleep at all. She didn't have much appetite and would have been happy with a breakfast of juice just like Tianyu, but the quack insisted she have at least a little congee, so she was trying to force some down. What was he, her mother?

"By the way, Master Lihaku, what do you mean, me 'too'?"

"Oh, someone came to me asking about the feitouman."

"Eek! No one mentioned it to me!" The quack quaked. If he'd still had his mustache, it would have been quivering like a loach's whiskers.

"I thought it might be best not to tell you. Ghosts aren't your favorite topic, right?" Lihaku said. He knew the quack well.

"Who was it who asked you about it?" Now Maomao was curious. The whole thing had happened so late the night before that she'd resolved to worry about it the next day and had quickly said her goodbyes to Chue.

"One of the servant kids. I gave 'em some candy and now we're friends."

He makes them sound like a dog or a cat!

Lihaku's repeated visits to the Verdigris House had taught him how to get on kids' good side. *If the apprentices don't like him, they'll never take his messages to Pairin, after all.*

Why bother demonstrating his new talent all the way out here in the western capital? That's what Maomao wanted to know. Maybe hanging around with the quack just left him with that much time to kill.

"I'm not saying I believe in spirits or whatever," Lihaku added. "When I asked if you'd seen it, I didn't mean... Well, I know you never take that sort of thing seriously."

"Now that I *have* seen it, I'm keen to pin down what it really is."

"I'd be happy to help," Lihaku said. "I'm off for today, though. If anything happens, wake me up." He cleaned his bowl and went to his room on the first floor to sleep. Even men of seemingly endless endurance had to get their rest. Getting a good sleep after a night on watch was part of Lihaku's job. A relief guard stood outside the medical office.

As Lihaku was leaving, a small child came up to the room.

"Where's Mister Soljer?" she asked, looking around, her face bloodless. Apparently the military man standing guard at the door didn't count.

Maomao quickly realized what she meant. "If you're looking for Master Lihaku, he's off duty," she said. This girl must be the servant Lihaku had mentioned. She looked to be about ten years old.

“O-Oh...” The girl looked disappointed and refused to meet Maomao’s eyes.

Maomao glanced at Tianyu and the quack. “Would you like me to call for him?” she asked.

“You’d bother an off-duty soldier?” Tianyu burst out. He was annoying, but right. It wouldn’t be pretty if their guard was sleep-deprived when something happened—but Lihaku had told them to wake him up if there was any need.

Lihaku was awake, and must have heard the noisy conversation, because he came right out of his room.

“Hey there!” he said.

“Mister Soljer!” The girl went right over to him. “We saw it again!”

“Oh you did? What did you see?”

“A head! A woman’s head!”

Somehow, everything kept coming back to this ghost story.

“Where did you see it?” Lihaku asked.

“Outside! The groundskeeper, he could barely stand up, he was so scared!”

“All right, I hear you. Where’s the groundskeeper now?”

“He’s out working in the garden. But he’s white as a sheet!”

“Good to know. Here, here’s some candy for you.”

“Yippee!” The girl skipped out of the medical office.

Maomao looked at Lihaku. “May I ask you something, Master Lihaku?”

“Yeah? What’s that?”

“You’re not doing this out of personal curiosity, are you? This is an official investigation.”

“I knew you were a sharp one.”

Lihaku didn’t make any effort to hide it. He believed there was a chance this “flying head” was really someone who might mean harm. If he was investigating, moreover, it was presumably on someone else’s orders.

“That Tianyu, he’s a heap of trouble,” Lihaku muttered to Maomao. It was rare for the sunny, cheerful soldier to complain like that.

The quack was humming a tune as he washed the dishes. Tianyu had finished his breakfast and was off brushing his teeth—an upper physician had ordered that the medical staff should not have rotting teeth; it wouldn’t look good. That physician being, not incidentally, Dr. Liu.

Sounds like Lihaku and Tianyu don’t get along. Maomao had sort of

suspected as much.

"The two of you don't click?" she asked.

"I guess. Tianyu and I...we're just cut from different cloth, maybe. It's not like we're going to get into a fight, but I'm not sure how to talk to him. You know what I mean?"

Maomao did, indeed, know what he meant. Usually one could solve those problems by keeping one's distance from the person in question, but that wasn't an option here.

"You're saying it wouldn't normally be a problem, but we're in such close quarters here that it makes things hard. And it might not be so bad if this was someone with whom you could settle things with a fight, but Tianyu is obviously not that kind of person. Am I right?"

"I *knew* you were a sharp one! It's not that I can't handle him, but...I don't know what's at his core. It's like I can see the branches, but not the trunk."

Lihaku seemed to have Tianyu pinned down by sheer instinct.

"Whereas you, young lady, there's a logic to how you behave. Whatever you do, you can bet there's either poison or drugs at the bottom of it."

"You could at least say 'drugs or poison,' please," Maomao replied. "As far as Tianyu is concerned, you're right that his personality has a few wrinkles, but I don't think it's anything to be too concerned about." He had managed to become a physician, after all, and shorthanded or not, they would never have brought him to the western capital if they hadn't thoroughly investigated his background.

"Sure, I understand. Sorry. I'm a soldier—I guess I'm always thinking in terms of battle."

"Battle? How do you mean?"

"The only thing I know for sure is that I could never trust him to have my back."

Sheer instinct. There was nothing Maomao could say to that.

She decided to put the topic of Tianyu aside. "In any case, may I ask: Did the orders to investigate the feitouman come from the Moon Prince?"

"Yeah, that's right. Master Jinshi told me to."

There was a name Maomao didn't hear much from other people these days. *Wish he'd said something to me.* Then again, Maomao did prefer to do things with the absolute minimum of conversation.

"Sorry, should I have told you? I know you—if something gets your

interest, you work on it so hard you forget to eat or sleep. And my orders include not letting you run yourself into the ground."

Maomao had thought she was keeping her monologue internal but apparently the words had come out of her mouth, and now Lihaku was apologizing on Jinshi's behalf.

Not let me run myself into the ground, huh?

In that case, she could wish that he wouldn't summon her to his room. For someone who never stopped piling fresh demands on her, Jinshi sometimes tried to be considerate in the strangest ways.

And now there's a floating head involved.

He was always coming to her with problems that seemed right out of a ghost story.

"It's strange, though," Lihaku said.

"What's strange?" Maomao asked. "Other than the flying head, I mean."

"That's exactly it. When I first heard the story, people talked about a floating mask. But over the last twenty days or so, a lot of people seem to be reporting a flying head."

"Interesting point. What I saw looked more like a mask than a head." She'd only glimpsed it, so she couldn't be sure, but that was her initial impression.

"This is that thing we were talking about at breakfast? Hard to ignore, huh?"

Maomao spun at the voice behind them. It was Tianyu, back from brushing his teeth. He was grinning.

Lihaku didn't look very surprised—he seemed to have guessed Tianyu was there. "Eavesdropping is bad manners, you know," he said.

"Eavesdropping? Me? No, no. I was just curious how long the two of you would keep chattering together. An unmarried man and woman!"

"Believe us, it's nothing like that!" Maomao and Lihaku replied in unison.

"Believe me, I don't think it is."

How much had Tianyu heard?

"So, that flying head. Some story, huh? Whaddaya say? Wanna let me in on it?"

"Absolutely not," Maomao shot back.

Tianyu's face fell. "Aw, why not?"

"Because you'll tell."

“I will not.”

“Because you’ll get bored in the middle of it and give up.”

“That I might do.”

Lihaku stayed quiet, letting Maomao handle Tianyu. He really *didn’t* like dealing with the guy.

“I can be useful!” Tianyu said. “If you don’t think I can be, or if you think I’m a risk or whatever, it’s just because you don’t know how to use me. Do you also refuse to use scissors because you could cut yourself with them?”

Maomao looked at Lihaku. He looked back as if to say it was up to her.

After a long moment, Maomao said, “Just don’t get in our way.”

“Yeah!” There was the faintest gleam in Tianyu’s eyes.

Maomao and Tianyu started by going out into the courtyard where Maomao had seen the feitouman the night before.

“So! What happens now?” Tianyu asked, although he sounded like he didn’t much care.

“What happens now is you show us just how useful you can be, Mister Scissors,” Maomao said, looking around the courtyard. She’d told Lihaku to get some sleep since he’d been on duty the previous night, but had convinced him to leave his map of the mansion with her.

Meanwhile, they’d told the quack they were just going to run a little errand, so their investigation had to be quick.

“You have to tell scissors which paper you want them to cut. Although you *can* stab any old thing from behind with them.”

Maomao didn’t respond to that. It sounded like Tianyu was miffed that she and Lihaku didn’t trust him.

He is who he is, though. His commitment to ethics seemed, well, less than enthusiastic.

“How about we start by looking around all the areas the spirit is supposed to have appeared?” Maomao suggested.

“Yeah, sure.”

The courtyard was where the mysterious mask was most often sighted. “Most of the reports place it by that tree or on top of that building,” Maomao said, looking at her blueprints. For an “annex,” this place was pretty big.

“Hoh!” Tianyu said, looking from the tree to the building and back. This was the same tree Chue had been dangling from last night. There

were still a bunch of leaves under it, suggesting the groundskeeper hadn't cleaned up yet.

"Anything catch your eye?" Maomao asked.

"Nah. What about you, Niangniang?" That was what he always called her. She'd given up trying to correct him, but these days even the other doctors were starting to do it. It was very frustrating.

"A couple of things." First she looked at the tree. "This tree isn't quite like the others I've seen growing in the western capital. It's bigger and taller."

"Yeah? So what?"

"Doesn't it make you curious? Different kinds of plants means different possible medicines you can make from them! We need to get a little closer to be certain what we're dealing with, though."

"Okay. And that has *what* to do with why we're here?"

That Tianyu—if he wasn't specifically interested in something, you couldn't get him to lift a finger for it. He was no fun, Maomao concluded, giving him a sour look.

"What's the other thing?" Tianyu asked.

"The other thing is that the feitouman reported inside the house seems to take the form of either a mask or a face. Outside, however, people claim to see a head."

"I'm sorry, how are a head and a face different? What did *you* see, anyway, Niangniang?"

"A mask, I'd say. I spotted it just as it disappeared around the corner of that hallway toward this courtyard." She pointed to the place.

"A mask... So it didn't look like a head to you?"

"No, definitely a mask or a face. But some of the reports describe it as a head." The discrepancy nettled Maomao.

"A head is basically the three-dimensional version of a mask, right?" Tianyu said. He was clever, and he'd immediately put his finger on something key.

"I'm not completely sure we can put it that way, but I couldn't help wondering. I was thinking I'd investigate that tree."

"Go right ahead. Need anything from me?" The dull scissors had finally decided to sharpen up.

"If you'd be so kind, then." Maomao took a handkerchief from the folds of her robe and wrapped it around a rock she found on the ground. "Toss this into the branches for me."

“Yeah, sure. You make it sound so easy.” Despite his grumbling, Tianyu tossed the rock beautifully, catching the cloth on a branch. It wasn’t exactly proper etiquette for a court lady to be climbing a tree. A handkerchief that had been blown away would provide a convenient excuse.

Maomao trotted up to the trunk of the tree. The plant was a broad-leaved thing almost six meters tall.

“Osmanthus,” she observed. A tree that produced a profusion of small, strong-smelling blossoms that could be used for making osmanthus wine or floral tea.

Maomao grabbed onto the trunk and had just gotten off the ground when she exclaimed, “Yuck!” Her hand was covered in half-dried bird doo-doo. The stuff was all over the tree.

“Gross,” Tianyu offered.

“Keep it to yourself, please,” said Maomao. She studied the gunk on her hand, then gave it a vigorous sniff.

“Are you, uh, smelling that?” Tianyu asked, unable to ignore what he was seeing.

Maomao, however, just stared at the ground, then poked something she saw there with a stick.

“Hey, what are you up to?” Tianyu asked, more confused than ever.

Maomao picked up two small twigs and held them like chopsticks.

“Huh? You’re picking it up? You’re...picking something out of poop, using chopsticks.” He backed up a step, giving her a profoundly suspicious look.

Maomao wasn’t exactly thrilled to be doing this, but there was a lot you could learn from animal dung. In addition to the not-quite-dry bird droppings, the space under the tree was home to something that looked like hairballs. They came from specific kinds of birds—some of them would spit up things they couldn’t digest.

“This bird appears to eat mainly bugs,” Maomao said, dissecting the hairball with a stick. Inside, she discovered insect wings and legs.

“Well, yeah. Birds usually do, right?”

“There’s some fur in here too. Probably from a mouse or something.” She also spotted some bones alongside the fur and insect bits.

“So it eats mice? Probably from a hawk or some other bird of prey, then.”

Bugs were one thing, but if this bird was eating mice, then it had to be

of a certain size.

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“Yes. However...” Maomao looked around. The wealth of water and greenery in this house attracted a fair number of birds, but she didn’t see anything that looked big enough to eat mice, at least not at the moment. A bird like that would have scared off its smaller cousins, anyway.

Maomao gave it another moment’s thought, then looked at the building.

“It’s not possible to get up on that roof, is it?” she said.

“I dunno. Want me to throw another handkerchief up there?”

“Think you could get it that far?”

“Doubt it.”

This didn’t seem to be getting them anywhere. Maomao was just thinking it was time to go back when something moved at the edge of her vision. She looked toward it and saw some latticework decoration under the eaves.

“I changed my mind. I do want to climb up to the roof.”

“What? But there’s no way up!”

“There’s got to be something. Let’s find a ladder.”

“Easy for you to say. We probably have to ask the groundskeeper...” Which Tianyu didn’t look about to do. His interest seemed to be flagging.

The groundskeeper? That was the old man who’d said he’d seen the head yesterday, wasn’t it?

Maomao headed for where the groundskeeper was cleaning up. “Excuse me! Could we possibly borrow a ladder?”

“What? You think you can just march up and demand something like that?” The groundskeeper was looking very put-upon. He seemed all-around gloomy, maybe on account of his strange encounter the day before. “They told us to be polite to the visitors, but they never said we had to help you climb up and mess around on the roofs!”

“And right they were too,” Tianyu said.

Whose side is he on?!

Tianyu was obviously not going to be any help. Maomao would have to persuade this man on her own.

“I think there’s a bird nesting under the roof,” she said.

“Nesting? You know, now that you mention it, there have been a lot of droppings around lately.”

“Yes, sir. Having bird nests around can only mean more work, so I thought maybe I’d clean it up. I would be perfectly happy if I could just keep any eggs I happened to find—they’re a medicinal ingredient, you know.”

“Medicinal? You don’t even know what kind of bird it is up there.”

“True, sir, but most eggs are very nutritious, regardless of species.”

Maomao was sort of making things up as she went. Most eggs were *edible*, at least, if you cooked them.

Then she added one last, little push. “I think I might know what’s behind the ghost that’s been terrorizing everyone lately.”

“Y-You do?! Really?!” the groundskeeper said.

“Yes, sir,” she replied, confident she could solve at least half the riddle.

The groundskeeper found a ladder for them in short order, but it was old and rickety and wobbled when they placed it on the ground.

“Let me guess. You want me to climb up on the roof?” Tianyu said.

“You say that almost as if you didn’t want to.”

“I don’t.”

Even Maomao didn’t think she could impose on the old groundskeeper to climb up to the roof, so she resolved to do it herself. The only problem was the gaggle of servants and bureaucrats that had begun to form once the big ladder was put out in the courtyard. (Didn’t they have anything better to do?)

Sadly, none of them volunteered to climb in Maomao’s place; they just stood and stared. One of them, incidentally, was the *original* official with too much time on his hands: Jinshi was there. Everyone else took a few steps back at the arrival of this VIP.

Jinshi looked at what was going on, aghast, then said something to Basen. Basen nodded and came over to Maomao, his duck following him politely.

“It looks like you’re going to climb that ladder. Let me do it. What do you need up there?”

“You’ll climb up there for me, Master Basen?”

Frankly, if that was the choice, Maomao would rather go herself. Basen’s athletic prowess wasn’t in question, but she worried that he might not...improvise quickly enough.

Besides, who knows what he might do with his outrageous strength?

The duck gave a flap of its wings as if to cheer him on. Maomao’s disquiet only increased.

“You needn’t trouble yourself. I can do it,” she said firmly, but Basen would not be deterred.

“I told you, I’ll go up there. What do you need me to do?”

Basen was clearly here on the presumption that he was going to handle this task. Maomao would have to bend.

"I think—I *think*, now—that a bird has made a nest in the rafters of the roof. If you find it, do you think you could catch the bird for me?"

"A bird? Ah, birds, I know how to handle," he said with a glance back at his duck. Domestic ducks, however, did not fly.

"I suspect this bird is nocturnal, so it's probably asleep right now. If you could sneak up there very quietly, so it doesn't wake up, please. If you can reach it, grab it."

"Understood." Basen was raring to go. Maomao felt less and less sure about this.

"Master Basen, one cannot get into Paradise if one takes a life unnecessarily, remember. Try not to strangle the poor thing."

"Try not to strangle it..." Basen immediately sounded, well, smaller.

This is bad, bad, bad.

She definitely felt an ominous ripple of foreshadowing. She seriously considered waking Lihaku and asking him to handle this, but then she looked up at the rafters again. He would never be able to fit between them.

"You know, considering the size of the space up there, I definitely think I should do this," she said.

"N-No, no, I'll go. You can count on me!" Basen responded.

Then he set off up the ladder, Maomao's anxiety mounting with every step. If there was a silver lining here, it would be that Basen was so sturdy that he wouldn't hurt himself if he fell.

Basen made the top of the ladder, then peered in through the latticework along the roofline. He shot Maomao an *all-good* gesture.

Guess that means there's a nest up there.

The latticework was designed to be removable, and Basen pried it away. He ran a rope through it and lowered it to the ground, then wedged himself into the roof space.

The entire assembled crowd, Maomao included, swallowed hard. Everyone seemed strangely silent—then Maomao realized that Chue had wandered up at some point and was holding a board on which she'd written *Quiet Please*.

For a long moment, nothing happened, and then there was a loud crash.

"Shoot! It got away!" Basen exclaimed.

Oh, come on!

Maomao was beside herself—but Chue put down her board and

scrambled up the ladder. What was she doing? She took up a position in front of the open roof space, and as a small object came flashing out she caught it in a net.

Everyone, once again including Maomao, was stunned into silence at Chue's display of dexterity.

Where'd she get that net from? Maomao wondered.

"Gotcha!" Chue cried and held the net aloft. She looked so thoroughly proud of herself that it was hard not to be a little annoyed.

She always did love to be the center of attention, and she'd found a perfect opportunity.

A hubbub spread throughout the courtyard, but when Jinshi, the most important person there, told everyone to get back to work, they obligingly scattered. Once the gawkers had moved on, the rest of them could see exactly what was in Chue's net.

"What in the world is this?" Jinshi asked. He and Basen looked equally astonished. Judging from Basen's reaction, the bird had gotten away from him before he'd seen exactly what it looked like.

Chue had captured an owl, about thirty centimeters in size. It didn't look like a normal owl, though—the most striking thing about it was its face, which was eerie and strange, round and white. The feathers ringing its face were black, and if it were somewhere dark and the owl had its wings tucked in, it might well look like a white mask.

However...

"Isn't it kind of small?" Tianyu asked, unimpressed. He didn't hesitate to throw himself into the conversation in spite of Jinshi's presence—the Moon Prince himself. Maomao jabbed him with her elbow. "Oops! Moon Prince, sir. I didn't realize you were here. Very sorry."

Maomao was coming to think that Tianyu was not very concerned with etiquette. Not that she was in any position to judge.

Jinshi's expression was somewhat hard, but superficially, he wore a smile befitting one who "lived above the clouds," a nobleman. "Considering the commotion, it would have been difficult not to notice. But what exactly were you doing?" he asked.

Playing innocent, are we? Maomao thought. Here he'd even sent Basen to do the dirty work.

Maomao, worried what Tianyu would say if left to his own devices, stepped forward before he could speak. "Sir. Rumor has it that an

apparition has been spotted in and around this house of late. The soldier attached to the physicians told me that he'd heard about it from a servant, and he's been investigating it on his patrols of the mansion. The same servant came to him again this very morning, but as our soldier was on guard duty last night, I hesitated to make him deal with it himself."

Maomao assumed Chue would have filled Jinshi in on their experiences of the night before.

"As a matter of fact, I myself encountered what I take to be that spirit just last night, so I wanted to help find out what was going on."

"Mm. And what about this physician with you? Presumably he has medical duties to attend to." Jinshi looked at Tianyu coldly.

Damn. She knew it hadn't been a good idea to let Tianyu get involved. She glowered at him. He, however, stepped forward with an innocent look. "My humble apologies," he said as elaborately as possible. "I begged her to let me accompany her. *Maomao* here is far more accomplished in the mixing of medicines than my inadequate self, and has been graciously teaching me a great deal. When she said that she wished to examine the courtyard, I simply assumed she meant she was going to hunt for herbs and other ingredients, and followed along."

Why, you little...

He was acting exceptionally polite and wasn't even getting her name wrong!

Maomao thought Jinshi's eyes glinted even more brightly. "Hoh, I see. I think I understand what's going on here. You believe this bird is the alleged spirit?"

"Yes, sir. Anyway, that's half the answer." Maomao looked at the owl.

"This place is too public," Jinshi said. "Perhaps I could ask you a few more questions somewhere else."

"Certainly, sir," Maomao said, and off they went.

Chapter 12: The Feitouman (Part 2)

Jinshi studied the animal in the cage. “I’ve never seen a bird with a face quite like this before. I never imagined.”

They had moved to Jinshi’s chambers, where he sat in the place of honor, with Suiren, Taomei, and Chue around him, as well as Basen for his bodyguard. Maomao suspected Basen’s older brother Baryou was nearby as well, but she didn’t expect to actually see him at any point. Gaoshun was absent; whether he was off duty or on some other errand, she didn’t know. For some reason, Tianyu was there too, smiling away.

Pretend you have work or something and get out of here! Maomao thought at him, but if it seemed like something interesting was going on, Tianyu would make it his business to be a part of it.

“What made you think a bird like this might be the true identity of our feitouman?” Jinshi asked.

Maomao closed her eyes. She would have to be careful not to give Tianyu any information that might tip him off.

“Sir. The first thing that struck me as odd was the word ‘mask.’ People said they had seen it by the tree or on the roof of the building, so my first thought was to look near the tree. My encounter with the alleged spirit also took the form of a mask.”

Chue had noticed the tree as well. Maomao’s investigation had turned up bird droppings—and not those of a small bird, but rather a fairly large, carnivorous one.

“I’ve seen small birds flying through the house during the day, so it occurred to me that if there was a predator around, they might well be nocturnal.”

“Mm. So that was when you realized there was a bird behind these apparitions. How did you prove it?”

“Once I knew about this bird, sir, it was a fairly simple guess. I’d never seen one myself, but I had heard of birds with faces that look like masks. There was a picture of one in the encyclopedia of animals that I got at the apothecary’s shop where I used to work. Although I admit I didn’t pay it much mind the first time I saw it.”

She trusted Jinshi would know which encyclopedia she was referring to

—one of the books brought out of the Shi clan fortress. It was in Jinshi's keeping at the moment; if he'd brought it to the western capital, he might be able to look at it.

"An encyclopedia?" Jinshi said with a glance at Taomei. She brought out an armload of books, Chue helping to carry those she couldn't fit in her arms. The books included the encyclopedia of medicinal herbs, along with those about insects and animals. Those were Shi clan books, but there were several others Maomao had never seen.

Guess he didn't waste any time digging them out after yesterday.

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She was impressed by how quickly he worked.

"This is what we would call, appropriately enough, a masked owl," she said. "No normal owl would give the impression of a flying mask—and this one has an unusual coloration." This owl boasted feathers so dark they were almost black. Usually, even birds with dark-colored bodies had white feathers on their bellies, but other than its face, this one was a uniform dark brown. It would be easy to miss it in the night.

"A masked owl? That's this, isn't it?" Jinshi asked, opening to the relevant page of the Shi clan encyclopedia. Coloring aside, the unsettling, masklike face certainly matched the bird in the cage.

Tianyu raised his hand. "May I ask something?"

"Go ahead." Jinshi sounded somewhat more commanding than usual.

"I agree it looks like it's wearing a mask, but doesn't it seem a bit small? It's a little undersized to be a person's face."

Tianyu peered into the cage at the bird. The animal wasn't fighting; in fact, it looked sleepy. If they put some nesting material in with it, maybe it would doze off.

"The human eye is unreliable," Maomao replied. "It might be only the white part you'd see floating in midair, but I think it would look bigger than it is." Then Maomao took a piece of paper from the folds of her robe. She was just looking for writing utensils when Chue took some out and offered them to her. She was nimble, that was for sure. Incidentally, she hadn't spared the annoyed looks at Basen, who had almost let the bird escape.

Maomao made four dots on the paper, right where a person's eyes, mouth, and nose would be, and held it up for Jinshi and Tianyu. "People will perceive anything as a human face as long as the dots are in the right place. It's like how we sometimes see faces in the knots of wooden pillars."

"So now we know what the mysterious mask was," Tianyu said. He reached into the cage and poked the owl, which didn't particularly react.

Taomei appeared carrying a small dish of raw chicken meat. It seemed she was more generous with owls than with ducks. Maybe two predators knew each other.

So the bird *gets meat?*

Taomei picked up a piece of chicken with a pair of chopsticks and held it out; the owl promptly took it. It showed no aversion to food offered by humans.

“What about the head, though? You said you’d solved half the riddle. Does that mean you think the head is something else?” Tianyu was no fool; he remembered exactly what Maomao had said.

“A mask and a head? What does that mean?” Jinshi asked.

Maomao began to explain, taking the chance to review everything she knew. “Witnesses began reporting it about two months ago. At the time, some people reported a mask and some said they saw a head, but in the last twenty days or so, most witnesses have reported a head. What’s more, they report it outside the mansion. In my case, I saw the mask, but no head.”

“So you think the mask and the head are different things. If this bird accounts for the mask, then what’s the head?” Jinshi asked.

“About that...” Maomao glanced at Chue.

“Yes? Whatever do you need? Is there something you want from Miss Chue?”

“It’s not you, is it, Miss Chue?”

Maomao considered the timeline. The head had been witnessed starting about twenty days earlier, or in other words, right about the time Maomao and the others had arrived in the western capital. And there was one member of their party who seemed especially prone to doing unusual things.

“How could you, Miss Maomao? Hasn’t Miss Chue been with you the last several days?”

Maomao had to admit that was true. They’d been working in the fields together.

“It was just a hypothesis,” she said. “But I feel like this owl has given me a big piece of the puzzle.” As the owl ate its chicken, she looked at its leg. There, she spotted a small, well-crafted metal ring. “I don’t think it will take us long at all to find out the truth about the head. We just have to set a little trap.”

She smiled at the owl with the unsettling face and gave it a pat on the head.

The next day, Chue appeared at the medical office. Maomao had cleaned up from breakfast and was helping the quack make some medicines. A look at Jinshi’s encyclopedia of herbs had given her some idea as to which of the specimens she’d collected might be useful, and they were experimenting.

“Are you a prophet, Miss Maomao?” Chue asked, blinking.

“I take it you caught the culprit. You weren’t too rough with them, were you?”

“What in the world are you two talking about? I’m so confused,” said the quack, who was in no way part of this conversation. It seemed like a lot of work to explain things to him, so Maomao decided to just have him keep working on the medicines. When he was done with that, she suspected he would make them tea.

Chue needed no invitation to make herself at home; she sat in a chair and waited for the quack to bring her some sweets. The conversation with Maomao almost seemed ancillary to her goal of treats.

“Don’t worry. It was just like you said, Miss Maomao. We watched the owl’s cage all night long, and when the bird suddenly started making a ruckus, we searched the premises. It was the strangest thing! We found a woman dressed all in black and wearing a bizarre mask.”

Chue related all this with great good cheer, while also grabbing a sip of the tea the quack doctor politely produced. The accompanying snacks were dried fruit, a very western-capitalesque treat.

“Really? Wow, who knew?” Maomao said, a bit taken aback herself to find that her prediction had been so on the mark. “So, was this the person who was keeping the owl?”

“Bingo!” Chue formed a large circle with both arms, a gesture of confirmation.

Maomao thought about the owl they’d caught. “It was pretty obvious it was a domestic bird. The way it had something on its leg, and wasn’t worried about being in a cage or eating chicken that had already been cut up for it. I don’t think this is an animal she was just keeping temporarily. She’s had it a long time.”

“Hoh, hoh.”

“Plus, there’s something that’s been bothering me about the witness testimony.”

Specifically, a commonality between the reports of the mask, which had started two months earlier, and the reports of the head, which dated from twenty days ago.

“Two months ago... Wouldn’t that be just about the time Empress Gyokuyou’s infamous niece was about to leave for the capital?”

“Oh!” Chue said, evidently catching Maomao’s drift.

“Suppose the owl was intended to be one of the offerings to be taken to the Imperial city, but it somehow got away,” Maomao said.

“Hoh, hoh! You mean, maybe she was trying to catch it so she could have another chance to offer it to the Imperial family now that a member has come all the way here? All right, but why the mask? Trying to hide her identity?”

Maomao had an idea about that, although it wasn’t a clear or certain answer—just one of her guesses.

“Miss Maomao,” Chue said. “Miss Chue may act silly, but she’s nobody’s fool. She would understand that your opinion was just one possibility, and would never accept it uncritically.”

It was Chue’s roundabout way of saying *Spit it out already*. Maomao saw little choice but to oblige.

“I suspect the mask and the black outfit are to make this person look more like the owl’s mother.”

Chue cocked her head at that.

“Are you familiar with imprinting?” Maomao asked.

“Oh yes, Miss Chue knows all about that. It means that when a bird hatches from its egg, it thinks the first thing it sees is its mother. The same way that duck feels about my little brother-in-law.”

“Yes, exactly. I think maybe whoever raised the owl intended to return it to the wild, and wanted to make sure it didn’t imprint on a human face.”

“Hoh...”

Judging by the owl’s droppings, it was catching its own food, which meant it knew how to hunt.

“However, it can and will accept meat from a human hand,” Maomao said. “Domesticate an interesting-looking bird like that, and a rich person might buy it as a curiosity, or it could be given as an offering to the nobility.”

“But its keeper didn’t want it to end up that way, so she let it go—or maybe it escaped?”

“This is only a hypothesis, remember.” Maomao refused to speak with certainty.

“It was her bad luck, though, that the owl took up residence right in Master Gyoku-ou’s annex! And when a member of the Imperial family arrived to stay there—well, how terrible!”

“Hypothesis!” Maomao repeated.

“She realized the owl would be quicker to come to her if she dressed the way she had while she was raising it. Then, when she caught it, she planned to release it somewhere far away, somewhere people would never

find it."

"Hypothe...sigh."

"Don't worry, I know!"

Perhaps the keeper had used some kind of bird whistle. The owl had responded, but hadn't come outside.

Regardless of whether Maomao's guess was accurate, it did gain them one thing.

"The person in black is the owl's keeper, right?" Maomao asked.

"Yes indeed!" Chue chirped.

They grinned at each other. The quack, still out of the loop, was visibly intimidated by two people who looked to him like they were up to no good.

If Maomao was right that this person had raised the bird from a fledgling, it would bring them close to solving one particular problem. Nianzhen, the former serf, had spoken of the Windreader tribe, and how the Yi clan had granted the tribe their protection.

But I'm betting they didn't earn the protection of a major clan by just ritually scratching in the dirt.

There was also the question of how they had actually gotten rid of the insects they found. Maomao felt herself being led to one conclusion: the Windreaders had kept birds. As she'd suggested to Jinshi, they might well have used the creatures to communicate. A fast, reliable means of carrying messages would have been very valuable.

For starters, Maomao decided she wanted to meet this masked stranger.

Chapter 13: The Windreader Tribe

Chue led Maomao to where the suspect was being kept. Maomao could hear someone shouting, “I *told* you already! This is all a big misunderstanding!” The voice seemed a bit too strident to be a woman’s, but when Maomao saw the suspect, she understood.

“It’s some kid,” she said.

The child was perhaps ten years old, with narrow eyes and lighter skin more characteristic of a resident of Kaou Province than someone from the western capital. And although her features looked boyish, the long hair tied back behind her head suggested that this person was indeed a girl. In general, men of the western capital, even young boys, wore head scarfs, or otherwise had their hair back in long braids. It was probably the mask and the long hair that had caused her to be mistaken for a grown woman.

“I’m not just some kid!” she said, puffing out her cheeks, which did not help her case.

There in the room with the suspicious child were Gaoshun, Taomei, Basen, and another guard Maomao saw frequently but whose name she didn’t know.

“Maomao,” Taomei called to her, narrowing her differently colored eyes.

“Lady Taomei? Why are you here?” Maomao asked. She didn’t seem like the kind of person who would normally be present at an interrogation —which wasn’t to say she didn’t seem like she would be very good at it.

“First they thought she was a woman, then they decided she was a little boy, whereupon my second son announced that *he* would conduct the interrogation. Imagine what happened when he realized he was dealing with a girl child.”

“Ah,” said Maomao. She could imagine. “Why is Master Gaoshun here, then?”

Basen wasn’t very good at dealing with women. How bad was he? Bad enough that there were fears that he would never succeed in leaving children for posterity.

“If you aren’t concerned to be alone with Taomei and Basen, Xiaomao, I can leave,” Gaoshun said, although the furrow in his brow was deeper

than usual. Maomao decided to roll with it.

"Mother..." Basen groaned. Here he was performing an interrogation under the watchful eye of his parents. Talk about overprotective.

The girl was just a child. Was that still too much for Basen to handle?

He seems to cope with me and Miss Chue all right. She could understand when it came to Chue; she was something of a rare beast. Maybe Basen viewed Maomao as falling into the same category. It made her frown a little.

"Isn't the questioning going well? Want Miss Chue to handle things?" Chue asked, approaching with a bright smile.

"No, Miss Chue, your help won't be necessary," said Taomei.

"Aww. But I'm so good with kids." Chue unspooled a string of flags from her sleeve.

"I'm sorry, but if I may ask, how far *has* the questioning gotten?" Maomao said, breaking in between the daughter-in-law and the mother-in-law. The members of the Ma clan were all very characterful, and Maomao feared getting left behind if she didn't take the initiative to insert herself into the conversation. Basen's duck could be seen sticking her bill into the room to get a look at what was going on, but she didn't actually come in. She was scared of Taomei.

"Pardon me. At the moment, this child—her name is Kulumu."

"Ku...Kulumu?"

"It's written like this," Taomei said, sketching the characters on the table.

"I see, thank you," Maomao said. The name didn't *sound* much like something from the area of the Imperial capital. If anything, it had the ring of something from Shaoh, or even farther west.

"Tell her! Tell her I'm just a beautiful young lady whose only crime was trying to get back the bird I raised!"

Beautiful young lady? Everyone looked at Kulumu. Whatever else, she certainly had a high opinion of herself. At the moment, however, saying so only seemed likely to get them further off track.

"She maintains that the only thing she wants is her bird back and that she has no malicious intent of any kind, and she has informed us in no uncertain terms that as such, we should return the animal to her and let her go," Taomei explained.

"Quite a demanding little so-and-so," Chue said. Maomao's thoughts exactly.

“Who cares?! I raised that bird! Here, look at this! You can see it likes me!”

“I’m not sure I can.”

The bird refused to look at Kulumu. Even at such close range, the creature appeared to be wearing a strange mask.

“I told you, I need this!” Kulumu put on a mask to complement her black outfit. Finally, the owl turned in her direction. “Heh, see? I raised it from an egg. And I was dressed like this the whole time.”

“Meaning it would respond to anybody dressed like that. Not just you,” Maomao observed.

Kulumu’s jaw practically hit the floor. “No, it’s true! You’ve got to believe me! How can you not trust such a sweet, innocent child?!” She looked like she might burst into tears. “I even know its favorite food!”

“My, but you are cute. It’s chicken,” Taomei said, taking a piece of meat in her chopsticks and holding it out to the owl, who hopped over and greedily pecked it up.

Kulumu looked even more scandalized.

“It turns out you don’t need black pajamas as long as you have food.”

Behind her mask, Kulumu let out what sounded like a choked sob.

Basen, meanwhile, was just standing there, not saying a word. His mother was on top of things. In fact, he looked an awful lot like Gaoshun, who stood beside him obviously praying that nothing would happen.

“N-No... I... I *raised* it! It’s mine!” Kulumu insisted.

“And can you prove that to us?” Maomao asked.

“I w-w-wish I could...”

“Gosh, Miss Maomao, you’re as ruthless with children as you are with everyone else,” Chue said, pure peanut gallery at this point, while Taomei held out more chicken. Chue, it seemed, was being deferential toward her mother-in-law, despite the liberties she appeared to take with her father-in-law and brother-in-law.

“It’s easy to be critical, but even children can start a proverbial fire. When you’re sneaking around a powerful person’s house, you’re going to get in trouble for it, even if you’re a kid, right?” Maomao said.

“Fair enough.” Chue took the chicken and was about to pop it into her own mouth.

“Oh, Miss Chue, raw chicken is dangerous. Cook it first if you’re going to eat it.”

“Oops! My mistake.”

Chue might have been a gourmand with an iron stomach, but even she should probably steer clear of raw pork and chicken.

"I m-mean it... I raised it! I h-hatched the egg myself," Kulumu said.

"Is that so? And where did you get the egg? How did you hatch it? And how did the owl escape? Tell us that?" Maomao asked.

Kulumu took another great sniff, then started to talk. "The e-egg, I... I got it from someone. This hunter who was friends with my dad. He said he didn't need it, but my dad didn't want to buy it."

"A hunter?"

"Yeah. He was out hawking, and he found it in this nest, so he brought it back with him. He thought my dad could hatch it and raise it to sell to some rich guy."

"Ah..."

And this bird had been what emerged.

"How did you hatch the egg, then?"

"D-Dad always keeps the room nice and warm. He uses plenty of fuel, and if it gets too hot, we open the window, and about five times a day he flips the eggs. I couldn't use any fuel, though, so I kept it tucked close to me. You know, like the way a mother bird might. It hatched after about five days."

"Hmm..."

"I'm sure she's right. Duck eggs are hatched the same way," Basen volunteered. He ought to know; he'd looked after those ducks for long enough. Maomao was only vaguely familiar with methods of hatching eggs, but it sounded about right.

This time Basen turned to Maomao. "Well? What do you think?"

"I think it sounds plausible. Too detailed to be a story she concocted on the spot."

"Agreed. Interesting, to find out ducks and owls are hatched the same way."

Interesting, but, unfortunately for Basen, irrelevant. Why was he so infatuated with ducks these days, anyway?

Yes, it's all basically plausible...

But something still nagged at her. "So you raised this owl with the intention to sell it?"

"N-No, I didn't!"

"Thought not." Maomao plucked a handful of Kulumu's black outfit. "You were hoping to return it to the wild, weren't you?"

After a second, Kulumu replied, “Yeah... I even taught it how to catch mice and bugs so it could hunt for itself.”

“But then it was sold out from under you.”

“Yeah! By my stupid dad!” She clenched her fists. “When he saw its unusual face and funny color, he waited until I was out somewhere and he sold it. He never even asked me! I didn’t have a mate for it, so I was gonna let it go back to the woods. That was the whole point of this suffocating costume!”

Kulumu was obviously furious, but it was hardly an unusual story. In Li, the head of the household was generally entitled to do as he wished with the possessions of the women and children.

I guess maybe it would be more surprising if you lived somewhere women were in a stronger position, Maomao thought. Daughters were commonly treated as tools to be used in political marriages, or as a way to gain a dowry. Selling a girl to the pleasure quarter was, in essence, much the same thing.

“I understand. Perhaps I could ask you a few questions while I get my thoughts in order? These questions are based entirely on my assumptions, so please correct me if I’m wrong.”

“Okay.” Kulumu sniffed and nodded.

“Your father isn’t a falconer himself, but makes his money domesticating hawks and other unusual birds and selling them to wealthy people, is that right?”

Kulumu nodded. “He hunts too. But pets sell for more.”

“And whom did he sell the owl to? Was it the daughter of Master Gyoku-ou, the owner of this house?”

“No! She’s his *adopted* daughter. The Nightingale King doesn’t have a real daughter that age.” Kulumu had stopped sniffling; she sounded strikingly clear and forceful.

“The Nightingale King?” Maomao asked. She’d never heard that expression before. Adopted daughters were hardly unusual, anyway. She hadn’t expected that to be the point to make Kulumu bristle.

“It’s the name of the main character in this play. He solves the hardest problems with speed and grace! The story is modeled on some old duke. Someone stuck Gyoku-ou with the nickname ’cause his name means Jade Nightingale.”

Kulumu might have looked young, but Maomao was starting to appreciate that she was a pretty sharp kid, with a highly developed

vocabulary for someone her age.

"Master Gyoku-ou certainly seems popular in the western capital."

"I guess. It helps that he's the oldest son of Master Gyokuen, who made this city what it is, but he's real friendly. He'll even talk to commoners."

"Is that right?" Maomao found that this man, Gyoku-ou, didn't quite make sense to her. Right now, though, there were more important questions to ask. "So your owl was sold to Master Gyoku-ou's daughter, but then it escaped and started living here in this house, right?"

"Pretty much."

"How did you learn the owl had gotten out?"

"Oh, well, the culprit came to me and apologized."

"The culprit?" Maomao glanced at Chue. Taomei and Basen looked equally surprised.

"I might not look like much, but I've got connections with the Gyoku household. They even taught me to write."

"Wow! And here you just look like a filthy little kid," Chue muttered.

"Who're you callin' filthy?! I'm a gorgeous woman, just like I said!" Kulumu snapped. Apparently she was over her crying fit.

"I'd be very interested if you could explain. If I may say so, you don't look like someone whose station would normally allow access to this mansion." Taomei had put it a different way, but she was essentially saying the same thing as Chue. Gaoshun could only look pleadingly at his wife and daughter-in-law, silently begging them not to be quite so rude.

"I was real close with Gyoku-ou's mom, Master Gyokuen's wife. She's a relative of my dad's. That's the way we got into selling birds to rich folk. I actually saw Gyoku-ou's daughter or whoever when we handed the bird over. I tried to ask her to give it back, but it was like she didn't know what to do. Guess she can't just give away something she got from my dad."

"So it was the daughter who let the bird go," Maomao suggested. She had to admit she didn't have the most favorable feelings toward the young woman, who had been sent to the Imperial capital as part of a political ploy, but it wasn't the girl's fault. Indeed, she didn't seem like a bad person as such.

"Couldn't tell you. All I got was a message: *It got away. Sorry.* I knew what they meant was they wanted me to catch it. Like I said. Innocent."

"I don't know about that. You gave the residents of this house an awful fright," said Maomao.

“Grr,” Kulumu growled, sounding like a wild dog.

“I think we’ve got the idea now, Miss Maomao,” said Chue.

“Yes. As far as it goes...”

“But that’s not far enough for you, is it, Miss Maomao? There’s something else you want to ask about.”

Chue was right. Maomao wasn’t primarily interested in why Kulumu had been lurking around the mansion.

“All right. Maybe you can compensate us for the trouble you’ve caused by answering a few questions.”

“Yes, I think that’s a fine idea,” said not Kulumu, but Taomei.

Maomao kept one eye on Taomei as she said, “Your family raises birds. Do you ever use them as a means of communication?”

“Not these days. I guess we used to, back in the day, and we know these people who raise pigeons.”

Maomao crossed her arms thoughtfully. “Did you ever practice falconry, then?”

“Yeah, we did. Dad just gave it up ’cause he thought he’d make more selling stuff to rich people. We used to hunt rabbits, even foxes sometimes. That’s the whole reason he didn’t want this egg—you need falcons or hawks to hunt big enough game to make it worth it. What’s better to have around, right? A pet, or something that can hunt? Pets’re easier to raise, though.”

She was right; an owl would only be able to hunt mice, or small rabbits at best.

“In that case, could you train the birds you raised to hunt only specific animals?”

Kulumu frowned at that. “We never did, but I guess it’s not impossible. Sometimes people feed birds one specific thing from the day they hatch, to influence their diets that way. Or you can give them specific rewards based on what they hunt for you. See, in falconry, when the bird brings a kill back, you trade it for food. They could learn what gets them their favorite treats, and then they might start looking more for those things.”

Yes, Kulumu was a sharp one, all right. Notwithstanding her shrill voice, she was far more grown-up than her contemporary Chou-u.

“That means maybe you could teach birds to target grasshoppers,” Maomao mused.

“Grasshoppers?” Basen said immediately. Whatever he thought was going on, it made him turn toward the duck, whose bill was still peeking

through the crack in the door.

"Grasshoppers?" Kulumu echoed. "You'd need a bird that wasn't very big, like this guy. And they like meat better, so it'd be more practical to teach them to trade grasshoppers for food."

"I see. One more question, then," Maomao said. She took in a deep breath, then let the words out all at once. "Are you a member of the Windreader tribe?"

That set Kulumu back on her heels for a moment. "How do you know that name?"

Maomao clenched her fist. "So you know about them!"

Kulumu, the self-proclaimed beautiful woman, crossed her arms and went, "Hrm..." Then she said, "I'm not sure I'd go that far. I've heard my great-grandpa used to go by that name back when everyone was still living on the plains. My grandma mentioned it to me a few times, but I wouldn't say I *know* much about them."

"Would you tell us what you do know?"

"Hmm. I dunno..." Kulumu was very pleased to discover she had something Maomao wanted. "Can't tell ya for free..." She smirked. She wanted money!

A predatory pair of eyes glinted behind her. "Speaking of *free*, perhaps you'd prefer to be handed over to the authorities?" Taomei was smiling. For some reason Basen, who wasn't even involved here, shrank back, and even the owl fluttered its wings and quivered. Gaoshun wore the impassive expression of a monk contemplating Emptiness, while Chue appeared to be pretending to be a tree.

Kulumu grimaced. No wonder even Gaoshun lived in awe of his wife.

Maomao coughed pointedly. "The negotiating is already over. You answer our questions, and we don't give you to the law. There's also the matter of certain future treatment..."

"Yes, for example, we're still considering what will happen to this owl," Taomei said, picking up the theme.

"Fine, I get it... My grandma told me that way back in the old days, one of the nomadic tribes was attacked, and most of them were killed. She said the women were taken as brides and the kids were sold as slaves."

That accorded with what Maomao had learned. But something bothered her.

"I heard the Windreaders used birds. Would this mean that their method of hatching and raising those animals didn't die with them?"

“Sorry, I don’t think I put it quite the right way. The Windreaders were wiped out. At least, that half of them were.”

“Th-*That* half?” Maomao and the others stared at Kulumu, open-mouthed.

“Yeah, sure. The Windreaders were always wandering the plains, doing some sort of ritual or whatever. So why would they all go everywhere together, in a big clump? It’s better to split up, right? Especially since they could use birds to talk to each other and stuff. Okay, so I don’t know for sure if it was exactly half. Maybe it was a third, even a quarter. My great-grandpa was with one of them.”

“What happened to the rest of them?” Maomao asked. “Everyone treats the Windreaders as if they were gone. And the ritual wasn’t able to continue, was it?”

“Hrm... Gotta say, I don’t really know. My great-grandpa was from the part of the tribe that survived, I guess, but he died when my grandma was about ten. She said he taught her a bunch of stuff about birds, but that by that time they weren’t nomads anymore. He was already living in town. She said they never had to worry about food, though, ’cause he had a regular customer who bought the pigeons he raised.”

“A regular customer?”

“I guess. Probably some VIP from somewhere, she said, but that was all she told me. I don’t think she knew much about it herself.”

Everyone fell absolutely silent.

“Huh? Hey, uh... Did I say something wrong?”

“No,” Maomao said slowly. “No, in fact, thank you very much.” For the first time, she truly appreciated what was meant by “a bolt from the blue.” No, that wasn’t quite true—she’d thought Kulumu might have been somehow tangentially connected to the Windreader tribe, but she had never expected to come so close to the heart of the matter.

“So, can I take my friend here home or what? I’ve found the perfect place to let it go.”

“You’ve finally got it back, and you’re going to release it?” Maomao asked.

“That was always the plan. It’s what my grandma taught me.”

Maomao caught Taomei’s eye. She gave a single nod, and Maomao handed the caged bird to Kulumu, who broke into a big smile.

“Perhaps you’d answer one final question for me?”

“Yeah? What?” Kulumu was in high spirits now that she had her owl

back; Maomao could see her front teeth as she spoke.

"You said your father was a relative of Master Gyoku-ou's mother. Can I assume that his mother was also a member of the Windreader tribe?"

"Couldn't say for sure about that. She seemed to like birds a lot, though, and definitely knew how to handle them."

If Gyoku-ou's mother was a Windreader, a great many pieces of this puzzle would start to fall into place.

This is some valuable information... But if Maomao believed what Kulumu had told her, it would also produce several contradictions. *For example, if the Windreader tribe wasn't completely annihilated, why didn't they continue the ritual after the attack?*

It would call into question the point of what Nianzhen the serf had been doing.

Then there was the question of why the surviving Windreaders had disappeared.

Yes, a great many questions.

I can think of a possibility.

Suppose someone let people *think* the Windreaders had been destroyed, and then put their talents to other uses.

People who could communicate information quickly would have a tactical advantage.

If you could corral a people who had been "wiped out" and keep them in one place, there would be any number of uses for them. It made sense when Maomao thought about Kulumu's great-grandfather, who had already been living in town. It would also explain his rather untimely demise.

Once the necessary knowledge had been passed along, people who remembered the past would only be a hindrance.

"Hey! Heeey! Miss? Can I go home now?"

Maomao snapped out of her reverie when Kulumu poked her. She must have gotten lost in thought. "Sorry about that. Could you tell us how to contact you? I might be able to introduce you to a client who'd be very interested in your birds."

"Yikes... Why do you look so scary?"

Apparently Kulumu wasn't being taken in by Maomao's attempt at a smile. She was trying to look friendly, but instead her face conveyed: *I'll be damned if I let this precious source of information slip through my fingers.*

“Ho ho. Don’t worry, we would never mistreat a child. Come, now, won’t you introduce us to your daddy?” Taomei asked, eyes bright. Kulumu twitched, then nodded.

Taomei is too strong, Maomao thought. She was a masterpiece of a woman, in a way distinct from either Suiren or the madam.

It’s gotten awfully quiet.

Chue was restraining herself, and Basen had adopted his father’s studiously contemplative expression. Maomao wondered if this was how Gaoshun had been fashioned into the man he was today. Presently he stood there, doing what appeared to be his best impression of a wall.

They sent Kulumu home with one of the menservants, then Taomei summoned Maomao.

“Would there happen to be anything you’re still not telling us?” she asked. Her tone was polite, but the message was unmistakable: *If you know something, spit it out.*

“I have my suspicions, ma’am, but they’re nothing more than that. Guesses, full of absurd conjecture. I hesitate even to give voice to them.”

Luomen had taught Maomao that she had to take responsibility for her words. She wasn’t about to draw concrete conclusions on nothing but the strength of unproven assumptions.

“Perhaps, but my—*our*—master isn’t looking for crystal clear conclusions. It’s in his nature to take in everything that he can. Perhaps you could share your thoughts with us in order to help him consider how to prepare for what’s going to happen.” She turned those predator’s eyes on Maomao. *Out with it!* they said.

“Very well, ma’am.” She knew Taomei would take whatever she said to “their master,” Jinshi.

“Don’t tell me. I think you should speak to him directly.”

“I really don’t think it would be a problem for us to simply talk here.” She was confident Taomei wouldn’t twist her words when telling Jinshi about them.

“By no means. My husband was just saying that the Moon Prince could use a chance to relax a little.”

“Excuse me?”

Taomei’s smile was almost mischievous. Maomao glowered at her, but she could do no more than that.

Chapter 14: The Past and the Possible

The beautiful room was suffused with the rich aroma of tea. The tea, which was served (*ploop-ploop-ploop*) out of a foreign-style teapot, was red as a rose. This was dark tea in the most literal sense, Maomao observed as she savored the smell. People sometimes took this kind of tea with sugar or cow's milk, but Maomao declined them—she couldn't abide sweetened tea.

"So, what's your take on the matter?" asked Jinshi, who managed to look elegant just stirring some milk into his drink with a spoon. That was the right way to do it to avoid making himself sick to his stomach. Suiren had heated the milk to make it easier on his digestive system.

Maomao sat across the table from him and sipped her own tea. *Are we sure about this? Is this the right setting for this conversation?*

Taomei had led Maomao directly to Jinshi's chambers, but no matter how you sliced it, she found herself at a tea party. Suiren didn't appear to object, meaning they had her tacit approval, but Maomao couldn't help wondering.

"Here, for you," the old lady had said with a smile as she pushed tea toward Maomao. She'd felt she couldn't refuse, so decided to enjoy just a sip while she spoke with Jinshi.

"I must warn you, sir, my opinion—"

"—is merely speculation, and might not fully accord with the true facts. Yes, yes. I assure you, I'll take an objective view of things and not accept all you say uncritically. Does that make you feel better?"

"Yes, sir," Maomao said. It was all she *could* say. Jinshi glanced at Taomei. Was his diligently official tone in deference to her presence? "Where would you like me to start?"

"With the Windreader tribe. Put it all together for me, even the things I've heard before."

"Very well, sir." That at least made things easier—she would be spared the effort of trying not to repeat herself. "We first heard about the Windreaders from Nianzhen, the former serf at the farming village we visited. He said the tribe had been destroyed in an attack meant to gain his people wives and slaves. The Windreader tribe was responsible for a ritual

of some kind and, according to Nianzhen, was under the protection of the Yi clan."

This much she had already told Jinshi, so he continued to sip his tea and munch on a snack as he listened. The snack, incidentally, was a foreign-style cookie well matched to the exotic tea.

"We can speculate that whatever the ritual was, it somehow helped stop plagues of insects before they happened. It might have been a practice called fall plowing, which involves turning over the earth to not only improve soil quality, but destroy the eggs of pest insects. I think Lahan's older brother would know the specifics."

"You mean Lahan's Brother. The La clan is full of highly accomplished individuals, isn't it? To think, they have two virtually professional farmers."

So it had come to this: even Jinshi called him Lahan's Brother.

I get the impression Lahan's Brother learned farming under duress, though.

With his distinctive diligent streak, she knew he must have dedicated himself to learning the ways of the soil. If he'd been born into an ordinary family, he might have become a more ordinary overachiever.

"Where is Lahan's Brother?" Jinshi asked.

"We received a message that he should be returning to the western capital tomorrow. He's mostly finished teaching the villagers how to farm," Basen reported.

Oh, yeah. We left him there, didn't we? Maomao thought. She wondered if he'd been successful in teaching them how to cultivate potatoes.

"When he gets back, tell him to come talk to me."

"Yes, sir."

Basen withdrew. There was a stray duck feather on his back.

Maomao looked at Jinshi to see if it was okay to continue.

"Go ahead," he said.

"Yes, sir. The Windreader tribe used birds in some capacity, but the former serf didn't know exactly how. The suspicious character we caught today—Kulumu—however, claims that the Windreaders were not wiped out, and that they passed on the secret of their birds, which is how their descendants now make their living. As you suspected, they appear to raise messenger pigeons. They might also have raised other kinds of birds."

Kulumu had seemed to believe that the knack for raising birds was

primarily about cultivating pets to sell to rich people, but that wasn't true.

"Depending on how the birds are raised, I believe they could be used to help find insects. But I do think that messenger birds are the clan's stock-in-trade."

This was simply the answer Jinshi had already arrived at.

"I think the Windreaders' greatest strength was their ability to use birds to communicate. Although I must emphasize that this is only my guess, I wouldn't be surprised if they were serving as an information network."

Jinshi didn't so much as flinch. "What of the tribe's survivors, then?"

"Again, this is only speculation—but I think they might have been protected by those who saw value in their abilities." Maomao spoke slowly, choosing her words carefully.

"And who do you think protected them?"

After a moment she said, "I'm not sure. The Yi clan, perhaps, or maybe some other power."

"Why would the Yi do that?"

Maomao knew as well as Jinshi that her answer created some inconsistencies. If the Yi had been seriously protecting the Windreaders, the tragedy of fifty years before would never have occurred.

"I make bold to refer to the former emperor's mother, the empress regnant, sir."

"You have my permission."

"It's because she destroyed the Yi clan."

"Hmm."

Maomao could see that it made sense to Jinshi. The empress regnant had ruled the country by proxy, controlling her son like a marionette. She seemed to have been a thoughtful and logical person; there had been obvious reasons for her to expand the rear palace and forbid logging in the forests. But when it came to the annihilation of the Yi clan, there was much that remained unclear.

"You're suggesting that the Yi clan tried to keep the Windreaders to themselves, not letting the Imperial family know about them, and when it transpired that they were in effect a private spy network, the clan was punished for it."

"I think it's a possibility, sir."

It was only Maomao's hypothesis. She offered it to Jinshi merely as something to consider in making his judgments.

"Understood. What about the possibility that someone other than the Yi

clan was harboring this tribe, then?"

"I remembered that the White Lady used pigeons to communicate. She might have learned to do that in Shaoh—and it's not impossible that it reached her, or Shaoh, from the Windreaders."

"So the Windreaders' art found a home in Shaoh. Which leaves us with the question, did it get there before the tribe was destroyed, or after?"

Now, that wasn't a very nice question.

"In my view, it would have to have been before their destruction," Maomao said.

"So it was treachery?"

"Yes, sir. They committed subterfuge."

Maomao thought once more about the reason the Windreaders had been destroyed. The tribe had been priests of some kind, yes, but suppose they had also been spies serving the Yi clan. If the Windreaders had betrayed their masters, then it would make sense that the Yi would choose to simply stand by as another tribe massacred them.

Then they collected the last of the Windreaders in the cities, where they could keep an eye on them, and made sure their arts were passed down to the next generation—then eliminated them.

Kulumu's responses had put the idea in Maomao's head and she couldn't get it out again. It would be easy to justify moving the Windreaders into town: the Yi simply wanted to protect them. When, in fact, they wanted to keep them close.

Jinshi seemed to agree with her; he was nodding along and sipping his tea. Maomao took a drink herself; her throat was parched.

"So the Yi are involved, and Shaoh. Is that all?" Jinshi asked.

"No—there's one more group." Kulumu had said something else that had gotten Maomao's attention. "Kulumu said something that implied that Master Gyokuen's wife, Master Gyoku-ou's mother, was of Windreader origin herself."

Jinshi didn't mince words. "That's right."

So he's already looked into it.

Why even bother asking about her speculation, then? Behind Jinshi, Chue held up two fingers and grinned. She must have been the one to get the info.

"It seems Sir Gyokuen's wife played a substantial role in helping his business prosper. Information is as good as gold in business dealings, after all. For him to have amassed as many resources as he has over the course

of these several decades, he must possess a power others don't."

And now his grandchild stood next in line for the Imperial throne. If Gyokuen was a self-made man, he had made himself better than any other man in the nation.

"No one has a bad word to say about this wife of his. They all say she was intelligent and warm." That made sense; Kulumu had said she was kind as well. Funny, considering she had something of a shady son.

That was about as far as Maomao needed to delve into this, in her own opinion—but there was one other thing she had to ask. "May I bring up something slightly off the subject of the Windreader tribe?"

"What is it?"

"It's about the farming village we visited. Master Rikuson was there just before we were."

"Ah, that." Jinshi looked away from her for a moment, apparently thinking. "I had Rikuson investigated as well. I know he went to inspect the local agriculture. Even though it seems to have been quite difficult for him—he's been very busy here in the western capital. The visit, though, was about confirming something we'd suspected since his days in the central region."

"All the way back then, sir?"

"Yes. The reports from I-sei Province didn't show any major damage to the harvest last year, but it was hard to be sure without seeing for ourselves. So Rikuson found the problem on his desk. Or rather, I put it there."

"You did, sir?"

"You doubt me?"

"Not exactly. Just curious."

Rikuson hadn't been looking his best when they had first arrived at the western capital. It was hard for Maomao not to wonder what he'd been up to. Maybe she was just paranoid?

"Allow Miss Chue to explain why he wasn't looking his best!" Chue said, stepping forward with an enthusiastic snort. Apparently "Miss Chue" served as her first-person pronoun even in Jinshi's presence.

"Chue," said Taomei, a bird of prey eying a presumptuous sparrow.

Geez, Taomei is scary...

"It's all right. Let her speak," said Jinshi.

With his permission safely gained, Chue let out a big breath. "Miss Chue already looked into it. On his way home from the village, Mister

Rikuson was set upon by bandits! You know the ones, Miss Maomao. Those poor guys who got their arms broken by Mister Basen."

"Yes, I remember, thank you."

I remember that "Miss Chue" used me as bait!

"Of course you do. Well, you also remember that the bandits who attacked Miss Chue and her friends were arrested and taken to prison. Later, the bandits' leaders were apprehended too—one of our informants kindly told us what we wanted to know. We also learned that one of our guides had taken Mister Rikuson to the farming village a few days earlier."

So, in sum, the guide passed information about his clients to the bandits, who attacked people unused to traveling the plains. The same guide had been responsible for the attacks on both Maomao and Rikuson. Chue, anticipating the bandit connection, had put on a little show for him.

"It really was complete coincidence that Miss Chue and her friends were attacked—"

Hey, don't lie to us!

Maomao had to pinch her lips tight together to make sure this rejoinder didn't come out of her mouth.

"—but in Mister Rikuson's case, it seems there was someone besides the guide pulling the strings."

"Someone who wanted to interfere with his visit to the village?" Jinshi asked.

"It's possible. Or it might just have been regular old intimidation. The other possibility Miss Chue can think of is that it goes the other way, and Mister Rikuson *wanted* to look like a victim. Then again, of course, maybe it really was just a regular bandit attack. If you'd prefer."

Chue had a surprising talent for drawing lines by implication. She spoke only of facts, without mixing in her own opinion.

Even if she does use me as bait.

Did Maomao bear her a grudge for that? Maybe a little one.

"Understood," Jinshi said, and gestured to Chue to step back. She straightened up and gave him a perfect bow.

From what I've just seen, it almost looks like...

It almost looked like Jinshi himself wasn't completely sure who Rikuson really was. Everything Maomao had heard, though, made her think he was at least a man loyal to his work.

Jinshi took a sip of his tea, contemplating all he'd just heard. Maomao likewise took a drink, although her tea was cold by now.

This tea's flavor should make me want something sweet, but... What she really wanted was something salty. No sooner had the thought crossed her mind than a tray of snacks appeared in front of her, delivered by Suiren, who caught Maomao's eye as she set it down. It bore a pile of plain rice crackers.

"Join me," Jinshi said, picking up one of the crackers. "It wouldn't be seemly for me to eat all these by myself."

"If you don't mind, then," Maomao said, one of the crackers practically already in her mouth. There was a noisy crunch as she bit into it. It didn't seem like particularly fine etiquette, but the salty cracker was so good.

I'll be able to take some of these with me, right? she thought. Some cookies to take as souvenirs for the quack doctor would be nice too. *Ahh, but then there's Tianyu to worry about.*

She could throw the quack off the scent easily, but pulling the wool over Tianyu's eyes would be harder. Better make sure first.

"Moon Prince. May I ask you a question?"

"Yes? What is it?" Jinshi raised an eyebrow. She had used the name "Moon Prince" because Taomei and the others were there, but he didn't seem to like it much.

"What shall I do about my position when it comes to one of the new physicians, Tianyu? Unlike the qu—I mean, the master physician, if I come here too often, it will be difficult to keep him from connecting the dots."

"That's a good point. Let's see," Jinshi said, but then he paused.

It was Suiren who continued, with a smile. "He's been informed that you've known the Moon Prince for some time, since you were training in etiquette in his chambers. Put your mind at ease."

"Training in etiquette?"

"Yes. It's not untrue as such."

"I suppose not..."

The description, frankly, made Maomao feel a little ill. To "train in etiquette" by serving a man of elegance typically meant to prepare to be his wife.

"It's not untrue," Suiren reiterated, still smiling.

Maomao took another bite of rice cracker, feeling not the least bit reassured by Suiren's explanation.

Jinshi appeared to be thinking about something as he ate. "Perhaps we should proceed faster," he mused.

Inquiring about *what* he felt should be hastened seemed likely to invite a very long conversation, so Maomao decided not to ask.

Chapter 15: The Short Straw

Lahan's Brother soon returned to the annex, just as Basen had reported he would.

"Hoo! That was *not* an easy trip!" he said as he set down his tools outside the medical office. He had a lot of stuff—potatoes and farming implements and who knew what else—so he was using a storehouse behind the medical office. He'd arrived yesterday but had immediately collapsed into bed, and was only just now getting around to cleaning up his tools.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Maomao said. Since there were no patients to speak of, she was there to greet him. For some reason, so was the quack—maybe he had time on his hands. Tianyu was allegedly watching the office, but it was really just an excuse for an afternoon nap. Lahan's Brother was probably too ordinary to attract Tianyu's attention.

"Yes, it must have been so hard for you. Look, you're positively tanned!" said the quack, sounding like a solicitous uncle or something. He looked like at any moment he might decide to invite Lahan's Brother to snack time.

"You're telling me. There's damn near no rain, it's just beating sunshine all the time. At least it's not humid." Lahan's Brother leaned a hoe against the wall.

"Ah, yes, of course. Would you like some nice, cold juice? We use water specially stored underground. Oh, it's wonderful!"

Isn't that water, uh, valuable? Maomao wasn't sure the quack was supposed to be helping himself. Just like that, though, Lahan's Brother had been asked to tea.

"I would love to—" Lahan's Brother said, but then he stopped. Or more appropriately, froze.

Maomao gave him a nudge, wondering what was wrong. From up close, she could see Lahan's Brother trembling. She followed his gaze to discover a gorgeous and most noble nobleman.

"Eep! Moon P-P-P—" the quack yelped.

Jinshi was standing there, smiling as if rose petals should be scattering behind him. "Would you, good sir, be the brother of Lahan?"

Even scarred jade was still jade. Jinshi approached Lahan's Brother, his lustrous hair rippling like silk.

"Er, um, yes. Yes, I am," Lahan's Brother said, obviously struggling to respond. He didn't look like he was going to be answering any questions more complicated than that.

Oh yeah. I guess that is the normal reaction.

Maomao had rather forgotten how inhumanly beautiful Jinshi was. He was possessed of a loveliness like that of a female immortal, the sort of thing that could capture the hearts of the serving women in the rear palace and make its eunuchs go weak at the knees. His very presence would naturally prove intoxicating to an ordinary person like Lahan's Brother.

"I must apologize to you," Jinshi said. "Here I've obliged you to accompany us on this journey, yet I haven't properly introduced myself. Perhaps you would recognize me as the Imperial younger brother? People call me the Moon Prince or the Prince of the Night."

Only a very few people, principally the Emperor, could call Jinshi by his personal name. As such, Maomao had discovered, he didn't use it even when introducing himself. That was a kindness in itself: if he gave someone his name and they inadvertently used it, they might well be punished for disrespect.

I guess it's not easy being in the Imperial family, she thought, and she really meant it.

"O-O-Of course. It's an h-honor to accompany you on this...this trip, sir..."

Funny. Just the other day he was complaining he'd been tricked into it.

Lahan's Brother, certified Ordinary Person, was as nervous as the next guy in Jinshi's presence. Incidentally, the quack hadn't taken his eyes off Jinshi. Said eyes sparkled brightly. Rose petals drifted behind him.

Jinshi said, "Lahan has told me a lot about you. He says that his biological father, being a member of the La clan, has no small talent for farming, and that as his father's assistant, his older brother possesses a knowledge of agriculture unrivaled by any average farmer."

In other words, he's a professional.

Lahan's Brother looked very, very conflicted, distinctly unhappy despite Jinshi's heaps of praise. No ordinary person, however, could resist Jinshi's shimmery aura.

In other words, Lahan's Brother was swept right along. Jinshi had him in the palm of his hand.

Ah, now this is worth seeing, Maomao thought as she observed the spectacle of Jinshi wielding his sparkliness like an expert swordsman against a person who, through sheer ordinariness, simply couldn't resist.

"You've been doing something called fall plowing to reduce the number of pest insects, isn't that right? I'd never heard of it before. I had one of my subordinates look into it, and learned that sometime in the past, the rulers of this area ensured the farmers performed this task. Unfortunately, people now see fattening up livestock as more important than turning over the earth in the autumn, and the practice has disappeared. Politics is indeed a difficult business."

"Y-Yes, sir."

"I'm also given to understand that you're as versed in the cultivation of wheat as you are in the raising of potatoes. Who would have imagined that stepping on the wheat makes it stronger? Another fact that was new to me. Indeed, every day I'm reminded of how much I do not know. It's my sincere hope that you will continue to help me redress my ignorance."

"O-Only by your gracious leave, sir," said Lahan's Brother, who was by turns flushing red and going pale. The quack, meanwhile, still looked fluttery, and regarded Lahan's Brother, with whom Jinshi had conversed exclusively thus far, with some envy. In fact, he appeared to have surpassed envy and gone directly to jealousy.

"Much as it pains me, there's something I wish to ask you about right away. If I might?" Jinshi said, expertly mixing the slightest touch of grief into his expression.

Lahan's Brother's cheeks went bright red, and even the quack was bowled over—collateral damage. In fact, he literally swooned, and Maomao caught him, setting him gently on the ground.

Yikes! Noting that Jinshi was as brutal as ever, Maomao nonetheless kept her eyes locked on the scene. She took the rest of the farming implements Lahan's Brother hadn't finished putting away and leaned them against the wall for him.

"If—I mean, if *I* might, sir. If there's anything I can do for you, just ask."

"Wonderful!" Jinshi absolutely beamed at that, and even the quack doctor, supposedly not involved in this discussion, sat there with his mouth working open and shut like a carp on a cutting board. "Perhaps we can go inside, then. I'll explain everything," Jinshi said. He snapped his fingers, and immediately Basen and Chue appeared, the former carrying a large

roll of paper.

Those two actually get along pretty well, don't they? Behind the pair stood Gaoshun, who obviously knew what was going to happen. His hands were pressed together and he wore an expression like a bodhisattva.

Jinshi walked into the medical office like he owned the place. As he entered, Tianyu sat up groggily from where he had been napping on the couch. Lihaku, standing guard, shot Maomao a *What's this?* look.

"Whaz goin' on?" Tianyu asked.

"Oh, you know. Stuff," said Maomao, who thought it would be too much work to explain.

"Huh," was all Tianyu said, although he sounded interested.

The roll of paper Basen carried turned out to be a map, which he unrolled on the office table. "This is a map of I-sei Province," he said. It contained plains and mountains and desert. It looked rather empty compared to Kaou Province, but there was a road that cut clear through the middle of it, a trade route connecting east and west.

"It's got a bunch of circles on it," observed Tianyu, inserting himself into the conversation as if it were the most natural thing in the world. The quack had managed to get to his feet and was preparing tea. Basen, meanwhile, looked distinctly displeased. If Jinshi hadn't stopped him, he might have chased Tianyu right out of the room.

We're standing awfully close. Awfully close to a member of the Imperial family. Was that even allowed? Maybe during his time as a "eunuch," but what about now? Maomao was worried. She suspected, however, that this was all part of Jinshi's calculations.

"Lahan's Brother," Jinshi said.

The other man snapped to attention. "Yes, sir!"

No objections about his name this time?

"The circles mark areas with farming villages. I fondly hope that you might help instruct them in the ways of fall plowing and cultivating potatoes." Jinshi wore a smile that could kill a man.

"I... What?"

Lahan's Brother had only just gotten *back* from a farming village. He hadn't even put his tools away!

"Yes, as soon as possible. Perhaps you could leave tomorrow."

Lahan's Brother closed his eyes, as if Jinshi's smile was too blinding to look at. There was nothing he could say in response.

Now I get it.

"Perhaps we should proceed faster," Jinshi had said. Now she knew what he meant. She was the one who had told him to use those he could use, but she couldn't help feeling a pang of pity for those who became tools in Jinshi's hands. It was a very large map and depicted a substantial amount of territory.

"How far is it to the village that's farthest from the western capital on this map?" she asked Chue, who seemed to have nothing special to do. Maybe she'd just come along for fun today. She didn't seem to be needed here, but she was probably looking for an excuse to get away from her predator of a mother-in-law.

"Oh, about four hundred kilometers, I'd say," she replied.

"Four *hundred*..." Lahan's Brother was white as a sheet.

"I'd like you to start with the nearest village, then go to the next nearest one. If you're uncomfortable riding that far, I can have a good, comfortable carriage prepared for you." Jinshi took Lahan's Brother's acquiescence as a given. "If at all possible, I'd like you to finish teaching all of the villages about fall plowing within the next two months. The sooner, the better. Potatoes can come after that, in good time."

This was, in fact, less about agricultural practice and more about preventing insect plague. Since they couldn't know what would be most effective, they had to do everything they could—and Jinshi intended to use everything and everyone he could. Maomao felt bad for Lahan's Brother, but he would just have to take this one for the team. As for what she could do...

Maomao went over to the medicine cabinet and took out some herbs, which she mixed with honey. She cut the mixture with water and put it in a glass drinking vessel, which she offered to Lahan's Brother along with the quack's tea. "For you," she said.

"What's this?"

"A stamina drink. I'll prepare a solution that should keep for quite a while, so take some whenever you feel too tired on the road."

"Why are you assuming I'm going to go do this?!"

"Can you say no?" Maomao asked.

"Do you believe you can say no?" Jinshi asked at almost the same moment.

Maomao certainly didn't believe he could—that's why she'd made the drink. She would also prepare some poultices to relieve sore muscles.

Lahan's Brother, ordinary person *extraordinaire*, found himself

confronted at point-blank range with a request from a man whose beauty could have brought a country to its knees. He couldn't possibly have it in him to refuse. Jinshi had been counting on it.

Gross, Maomao thought.

Lahan's Brother might have been ordinary, but as far as ordinary people went, he was very good at it.

"Won't you, please? For me?" Jinshi smiled as if to say how much help this would be to him. Lahan's Brother could only droop, defeated.

Tianyu, who had no stake here, found he had the freedom to chuckle to himself at this other person's unhappiness, so Maomao gave him a kick in the heel. Lahan's Brother was so pitiful, even she had to sympathize with him. In politics, however, to lose the initiative was to lose all. A leader had to stay ahead of what was happening in his country, and eliminate all possible sources of trouble. If he failed to do so, the blame would fall on him—and if he succeeded, so would the indifference, for people would simply assume it was his job.

It's not easy, huh?

Much as she felt for Lahan's Brother, Maomao knew Jinshi wasn't wrong to do what he did.

Chapter 16: A Moment's Peace

For a little while after that, Maomao's days were peaceful.

That's not to say there was no work. The medicines in the medical office had to be restocked using ingredients that could be found in the western capital, and she had to make sure they worked as intended. She also tried to gather some medical instruments to make up for the shortfall in what they had.

The freak strategist showed up at the annex more than once, as well. Maomao had been trying to avoid him and the trouble he would cause, but before she knew what was happening, the quack was showing him in and inviting him to tea. She could only put her head in her hands.

About the only other notable event was that Basen's duck started laying eggs. He got very upset at Maomao when she tried to eat one—he insisted that he would raise the chick, but as it was an unfertilized egg, no chick would be forthcoming. When Maomao told him as much (shades of her lectures at the rear palace), he'd gone bright red. And this was a full-grown adult male? Oof.

She'd had a bit of a fright when she spotted Gaoshun and Taomei walking arm in arm in the courtyard. She'd let her gaze linger a moment too long, surprised and wondering if they got along better than she had realized, when the predator's eyes flashed. Gaoshun was abruptly shoved away by his wife, who continued to walk along as if nothing had happened. Being shy was one thing, but the younger husband ended up propelled into a pool. A tragedy.

Days turned into weeks, and soon it had been an entire month since Lahan's Brother had left on his journey. Maomao continued to inspect Jinshi's burn, but she found it increasingly hard to ignore the desire to take some skin from his backside.

"It sounds like things are going well enough," Jinshi said one day. He held a crumpled letter which, when he showed it to her, contained a detailed report about the state of some farmland.

"With Lahan's Brother, you mean?" Maomao asked, inspecting the handwriting, which was neat and careful, although it tended to lean to the right a bit. The letter had to be able to travel by pigeon, so unfortunately,

reporting on the current situation consumed all the meager available space. Lahan's Brother didn't even have room to sign his name. The letter concluded with the name of the village he'd been in when he wrote it, and that was all.

It's a real shame, him not having room to sign it, Maomao thought. She could just picture him on some far-flung plain, teeth clenched around a handkerchief as he tried to endure the agony. Would that day ever come when they might discover what he was truly called? No one knew. No one knew.

"Yes, that's right. I knew this would be useful." Jinshi looked into the birdcage and smiled. The pigeon cooed. "They may only work in one direction, but being able to communicate information so quickly is a boon."

He used them in his communications with Empress Gyokuyou as well. Given that he hadn't raised the subject of her niece lately, Maomao assumed the Empress had the matter in hand.

She looked at the pigeon, which pecked at some millet and burbled again. "So you sent some of these birds with Lahan's Brother?"

"Yes. I was able to borrow several through that girl—Kulumu, was that her name?"

"How many did you send with him?" Maomao asked offhandedly.

"Three. He seemed capable enough of taking care of them. We can supply him with more by sending a fast rider to his last location."

Jinshi opened a map of I-sei Province. Suiren appeared and drew circles around the villages from which letters had been received.

Lahan's Brother's really been hard at work, Maomao thought. Jinshi had given him the seemingly impossible task of reaching all the villages in two months, but Lahan's Brother was almost on the return leg of the trip. *That guy sure knows how to get a job done.*

He also, she suspected, didn't realize that it was precisely his ability to get a job done that caused people to foist so many on him. If he were clever, he'd have dialed it back by twenty percent or so, instead of going all out every single time.

"Maomao."

"Yes, sir?"

Jinshi seemed to have grown accustomed to using her name. She remembered how for a long time he'd addressed her merely as "you."

"I... Hrm. It seems your workload has dropped off recently."

“Yes, I’d say so.” The most urgent tasks had been taken care of. They’d made enough medicine to hold them for a while, and had even gotten the tools they needed.

“Perhaps you might turn your hand to other things.”

“Oh!” Maomao clapped her hands, remembering. “The wheat harvest is coming up soon. Do you think I could go help with that, sir?”

This didn’t seem to be what Jinshi had been expecting. “The wheat harvest? Why?”

“Sir! I’m very curious if any ergot has grown.”

“Ergot?” It sounded like he didn’t recognize the word.

“It’s a kind of sickness where the wheat becomes black. In simple terms, it’s toxic to eat.”

“Yes, that does sound quite simple.”

“By the time the wheat is ground it’ll be too late to tell, so I’d like to look now.”

Ergot could be used to induce abortions, and there was commonly a good deal of it in poor-quality flour, so it was best to be sure. She could see exactly how large the harvest was at the same time.

“I see. Very well. I’ll prepare a carriage for you.”

“That won’t be necessary, sir. A little bird told me that Master Rikuson will be going for an inspection soon, and I thought I might be able to travel with him.”

The specific species of little bird? The quack doctor, who’d happened to overhear it from somewhere. Maomao had confirmed the validity of the rumor with Chue.

“Rikuson...”

“Yes, sir. There’s a great deal I’d like to talk with him about. I thought it might be a good opportunity.”

She’d ended up not seeing Rikuson again after that first day in the western capital. She needed to talk to him personally.

Jinshi looked briefly conflicted, but then he said, “All right. I’ll inform Rikuson that you’ll be coming.”

“Thank you very much, sir.”

There was one other thing she wanted to do on this trip—gather medicinal herbs from the plains on the way. Some of her specimens from the previous trip had yielded promising results. She’d better hurry and go get a basket to put them in.

“If you don’t mind, then, Master Jinshi, I’ve got to be going!”

“Hey!”

Jinshi looked like there was something else he wanted to say, but Maomao ignored him. She trotted off, practically skipping away to get everything ready.

A few days later, Maomao left for the farming village.

“My, what wonderful weather we’re having,” Chue said with a big stretch. These days it seemed that Chue tagged along wherever Maomao went. “Guess I didn’t have to worry about rain after all!” She leaned out of the carriage for a good look: the weather was indeed lovely.

Maomao caught the scent of grass on the breeze as she let the rattling carriage carry her along.

“The weather should be clear for a while yet. Outside of the rainy season, I-sei Province doesn’t get any precipitation worth mentioning,” said Rikuson, who sat in the seat across from them. He wore an outfit that would be easy to move in, appropriate for visiting a farming village.

“Sounds perfect for a wheat harvest,” Chue said. If rain fell during the harvest, the wheat could start to sprout, which would make it lower quality. And if it couldn’t be properly dried, it might simply rot.

“It is. The weather can be fickle, though. I’ve even heard of hailstorms occurring around harvesttime.”

“Hail can be awfully difficult to predict, can’t it?” Maomao said. She was no farming expert; such sympathetic but innocuous interjections were the most she could hope to offer. If Lahan’s Brother had been here, he would probably have been clenching his fist and expounding on the manifold labors of the harvest season.

Maomao glanced toward the driver’s bench: Basen was holding the reins. Lihaku would have been just as good for a guard, but since Basen had accompanied them last time, he did so again now. His duck was there too. She was practically their mascot at this point.

Maomao looked at Rikuson. “What caused you to want to survey the farming villages, Rikuson?” she asked. This was the question she’d wanted to address to him personally. She suspected Jinshi had already given her the answer indirectly, but she wanted to hear it from Rikuson’s own mouth.

Rikuson glanced around, with what seemed to Maomao a particularly long look at his subordinates following behind the carriage. Then he said, “There are several reasons. Which would you like to hear, Maomao?”

As she had requested, he addressed her with no honorific or title—in the past, he'd been altogether too respectful toward her. Chue seemed intrigued, though, that they spoke in such familiar terms.

"All of them," she said firmly.

"Very well. The first has to do with insect plagues. I happen to be in contact with Sir Lahan, and I frequently lean on his knowledge and expertise. He warned me that if there were to be a plague in Li, it would be likely to come either from the north or from the breadbasket to the west."

Indeed, a small-scale plague of locusts had broken out in the fertile regions to the northwest the year before. The terrifying thing about these insects was that, left alone, they would wreak ever more destruction.

"For reasons I won't pretend to know, I was given the honor of being posted here to the western capital, where I'm treated essentially as a bureaucrat. The polite term for what I do might be secretarial work, but less favorably, I could be called an errand boy. Some of the paperwork I deal with just happens to be about harvests, so I took an incidental interest in the availability of stores and provisions."

"Do you really need to go visit in person, though?"

"That's the second reason." Rikuson held up two fingers.

Maomao's eyes widened. She wasn't sure what he could mean.

Rikuson smiled, almost apologetically. "I think you may be aware of this already—that the numbers in the reports regularly fail to line up with the actual amounts?"

Was he talking about the attempts to fudge the production quantities? Such things did indeed seem to be going on in the farming villages.

"What's the third reason, then?" Rikuson had said he had several reasons, and Maomao didn't think just two would qualify as several.

"The third reason?" His mouth sat open for just a beat. Then he said, "A long time ago, I heard that there was a special form of cultivation. Something that would decrease the number of pest insects."

"You mean fall plowing. So that's why you spoke to Nianzhen."

"That's right. Do you see now?" Rikuson's smile was gentle. Maomao thought he looked thinner than the last time she'd seen him.

"Who told you about fall plowing?" Maomao asked.

"My mother and my older sister. My mother was a merchant who engaged in trade far and wide, and my sister helped her. I learned quite a bit from them in my younger days." Rikuson looked out the window of the carriage, but he didn't seem to be taking in the scenery.

"That makes sense," said Maomao.

What else do I need to ask?

She spent long enough thinking about it that they arrived at the village, the carriage rattling as it slowed. Maomao stuck her head out the window. Wheat shimmered golden in the fields—it looked like a rich harvest. She saw green leaves too, suggesting the villagers had planted potatoes.

All right. Shall we dedicate ourselves to farmwork for a while? Herb collecting could come on the way home. Maomao had just hopped out of the carriage, sprightly and ready to go, when she saw a fast rider coming up behind. That wasn't so remarkable in itself—but from the man's look, something was clearly wrong.

Maybe he was attacked by bandits?

No, that wasn't it.

The horse stopped in front of Maomao and her party, its tongue lolling from its mouth as it listed to one side. Its rider wore the uniform of a soldier.

I think I recognize him. He was one of the guards who frequently attended Jinshi. That would suggest he was of a fair rank—so what was he doing running himself ragged catching up with them?

"What's going on?" Maomao asked. She held out water, but the man shook his head. His mouth worked open and shut; he didn't say a word, but gave her a piece of paper.

The heck?

The paper, folded as small as possible, seemed to be a letter from Lahan's Brother.

"The Moon...Prince... He said if you saw this...you would understand..."

Understand what? Maomao wondered. Perplexed, she opened the letter.

A single line ran down the page. It wasn't even drawn with a brush; it looked messy, like Lahan's Brother had used a piece of charcoal as an improvised writing instrument. But that wasn't all—the line had been violently scratched out again. The letter didn't even say where it was from, but there was no mistaking who had sent it.

Lahan's Brother had needed to tell them something so badly that he had found time in the midst of some sort of chaos to send a pigeon with this message.

I know what this is, Maomao thought. She realized she recognized the

dark scribbles. They resembled the picture that the girl Jazgul had given her the year before, after the visit of the Shaohnese shrine maiden.

Maomao hadn't understood what it meant then.

But I do now.

The line was the horizon that spread out before her. And the blot was a dark cloud.

She looked at the sky, still clear and blue, and said, "They're coming."

Chapter 17: Disaster (Part 1)

“What? A plague of insects?” a villager said, sounding exasperated.

Maomao had immediately requested the headman to gather the farmers. There were so many people packed in the place where they were meeting that it was almost hard to breathe.

“Yes! It will be here soon—within days!” Maomao said, desperate.

The villagers only laughed. “Yeah, okay, there were some bugs last year, but look at the windfall this year! Everything’s fine!”

“He’s right. The weather will be fine for a while yet. No need to trip all over ourselves getting the harvest in,” said someone else.

Then, however, someone in the group growled, “Ya lazy bastards! We’ll never make it in time with that attitude!”

“Nianzhen...” Maomao said.

It was the old one-eyed man who had lived through a plague of insects so terrible that people had resorted to cannibalism. He made no attempt to hide his anger with the villagers and their blasé attitude. He slammed the table with his right hand, the one that lacked a pointer finger.

“You lot wouldn’t know, because you won’t *listen*! Nothing can save you now. Me, I’m going out there and I’m going to start harvesting this minute.”

“Is’t really as important as all that, Nianzhen?” the headman asked. In a village full of very newly minted farmers, the former serf was the oldest and most experienced of all. Even the headman couldn’t dismiss him out of hand.

“I haven’t had my lunch yet, headman. Think I could go grab a bite?” asked one of the villagers, sounding entirely unconcerned.

Thank goodness Basen isn’t here. They’d made him wait outside, knowing that anywhere that Basen went, his duck was sure to follow. A quick glance confirmed that the duck was there, playing with the local kids.

Maomao was convinced that talk was futile. They should be spending this time getting started on the harvest.

Just as she was really starting to fret about what to do, Rikuson stepped forward. “Perhaps you would help if you felt there was something in it for

you?" He gave them that pretty-boy smile. "We'll buy your grain. At twice the market price."

There was a heavy, jangly *thump* as Rikuson dropped a bag onto the table. It was obviously stuffed with money, easily more than a farmer would make in a year.

The villagers were immediately riveted on it.

"You... You mean it?"

"We're gonna hold you to that, you know."

Their eyes were feral.

"Yes, but only whatever's in excess of your taxes. Furthermore, it only applies to whatever you can gather in the next three days." Rikuson's gentle tone never faltered, but what he was asking for was impossible. And yet, the fire that sparked in the villagers' eyes never went out.

That's the power of cold, hard cash, Maomao thought.

The villagers streamed out of the meeting place and got to work. They went back home and gave sickles to their wives, their children, their elderly family members.

Once they were alone in the hall, Maomao turned to Rikuson. "Are you sure about this? Are you even at liberty to make a promise like that?"

"If there is a plague of locusts, then grain will fetch far more than twice the average price, and we'll come out ahead. If there's no plague, well, I won't have any complaints about that. Is there a problem here?"

"No, none at all."

She should have expected him to be quick when it came to calculations like this. He'd said his mother was a merchant, and even more tellingly, he was on good terms with Lahan.

Chue, apparently inspired by what Rikuson had done, was looking highly motivated. "Are we going to work too? I think I'll help in Mister Nianzhen's field. What about you, Miss Maomao?"

"Me... I think I'll get ready to help make food. And I'll make pesticide too."

She flipped through the encyclopedia of herbs Jinshi had given her, looking for anything that might help kill bugs. She had some misgivings about producing pesticides right next to the food they were going to hand out for people to eat, but desperate times called for desperate measures. Maomao was virtually certain the plague would occur. The only question was when.

Where was Lahan's Brother last?

He'd been about to begin the return leg toward the western capital, but he was still deep in the western reaches of I-sei Province. He'd encountered a swarm of grasshoppers there, and had managed to dash off his message and get the pigeon in the air before the bugs were upon them.

But he didn't have time to find proper writing utensils. The situation had obviously been desperate. The grasshoppers were already starting to carve their swath of destruction. In all likelihood they would begin moving east, toward the western capital, eating everything in their path.

It's started now. There's no delaying it any longer. The only questions were how they could bring this to an end, and what that would entail.

First they had to save as much of the grain from the ravenous insects as they could—harvest it, get it inside, and make sure the storehouses were shut up so tight that not a single grasshopper could get in. Now the challenge began. She didn't have to find the best solution, she just had to keep looking for a better one.

The villagers were in the fields, harvesting grain as fast as they could.

I worry whether it's going to rot.

Normally, grain would be allowed to sit outside several days to dry—but what should they do here? More than anything, they needed places to store the harvest.

All right, enough. If I'm going to think, I need to work while I'm doing it.

Maomao borrowed a stove and began making a huge pot of soup. She wished she could make it with some nice, astringent soy paste—her personal preference—but she suspected it might not be to the villagers' tastes. Instead she fried up some vegetables in oil, put plenty of salt on them to give them some flavor, and then added them to a stew of milk and dried meat.

The ironic thing is, people from the central region would turn up their noses at too much milk.

She added some fragrant herbs to make it less pungent. A bit of flour to thicken it, and she started to think she might have a winner on her hands.

Wish I could do some dumplings, but I think we'd better not. Instead she would get fried bread for the entrée.

Maomao poured the soup into bowls and put the bowls on a tray, then zipped around handing them out to the workers.

"Miss Maomao, Miss Maomao! One for Miss Chue, please!" Chue flounced up to her. She'd practically transformed herself into one of the

villagers, carrying a knife in her right hand and a sack in her left. The sack was full of ears of grain.

Maomao gave Chue some stew. “You’re only taking the ears of grain?” she asked.

“It was Mister Nianzhen’s idea! He said if the harvest was the only important thing, it would be faster to collect just the ears.”

Yes, that certainly would be faster than having to bend over and cut down every stalk.

Maomao and Chue sat down on a nearby fence to enjoy their meal. Maomao had already eaten her stew, so she munched on some bread.

“There won’t be time to dry everything, and it won’t fit inside if the stems are still on,” Chue said.

“Good point.”

Wheat straw was used as livestock feed and for daily necessities like reed mats. It was an important secondary product, but right now there were more important things to focus on.

“Oh me, oh my, but money is a powerful thing, isn’t it? All we had to do was whisper in their ears ‘The straw can come later,’ and look!”

The villagers had immediately traded their sickles for small knives. The children went from field to house dragging bags full of ears of grain.

“Now they’re drying them inside because the ears would fly away in the wind out here.”

“You’re quite good at getting your way, aren’t you, Miss Chue?”

“Oh, yes. You should see how I motivate my husband on nights when he’s not in the mood!”

Maomao had a thought: perhaps her brothel humor, which so frequently fell flat, would land with Chue. Sadly, no really good jokes came to mind at that moment.

She finished the last of her modest meal, vowing to work up a routine she could share.

Rikuson had been exactly right to tell the people they had three days to collect the grain: with a firm deadline in place, everyone busied themselves thinking of ways to harvest more efficiently. By the second day, more than half the grain had been taken in.

Basen, with his immense strength, proved his worth now. He could carry a full bag of grain in each hand, doing what would otherwise require several full-grown adults.

However, more delicate work, as always, eluded him.

"Oh no! What are you doing? You are hopeless, little brother-in-law!" Chue cried. Basen, trying to repair a house, had only ended up doing more damage, making himself a target for more teasing from Chue.

We can't have the storehouses full of holes, Maomao thought. She was patching a house with mud and clay—wood was precious in this part of the country, so earth would have to do.

"I think we were just in time," Rikuson said, looking up at the sky. Maomao looked too, and saw a small black cloud beyond the hills.

"Isn't it a little early for the rainy season?" she asked.

"Yes... Yes, it is." Rikuson looked pained. "A cloud at this time of year is rather troubling."

That sounded very ominous and all, but Maomao wasn't sure exactly what he meant.

"What's that about the clouds?" Basen asked as he passed by, lugging a couple bulging sacks of grain as if they weighed nothing at all.

"I merely meant that it's not a good thing to see a rain cloud at this time of year," Rikuson said, pointing to the sky to the east.

"I hear you. There's another cloud over there. Is that a bad sign too?"

"Over there?" Rikuson looked. Basen was pointing in the opposite direction. "I'm afraid I don't see anything."

"Hee hee! My little brother's eyes are *hopelessly* good," Chue broke in. "Regular folk might like to have a telescope on hand, though." Even Chue didn't appear to carry one of those, because she leaned forward and squinted.

Maomao joined her, narrowing her eyes and peering toward the western sky. "Clouds, clouds..."

She thought she heard a faint buzz. Then she saw some black specks that wavered in the air. They didn't look like any rain cloud she'd ever seen.

"Miss Maomao, Miss Maomao!"

"Miss Chue, Miss Chue!"

The two of them looked at each other and nodded.

Maomao grabbed the soup pot and a pestle lying nearby and banged them together. She raced through the village, crying, "Grasshoppers! The bugs are on their way!"

Chue found some men sitting around drinking tea and gave them each a smart smack. "You heard her! Grasshoppers, incoming!"

They had to do anything they could to light a fire under these villagers. Panic would solve nothing, but at that moment, they needed everyone to give everything they had.

Chapter 18: Disaster (Part 2)

The first one came when about seventy percent of the harvest had been brought in. Darker than an ordinary grasshopper, with longer legs. Somebody crushed and killed it. Someone else shouted not to bother—that they had to keep harvesting.

Torches were lit. It would barely be a drop in this ocean, but it was something.

The women and children went into the houses and tried to cover any cracks with mud or cloth. The houses were dark inside, but they were sternly warned not to light any fires, and also to have food ready that could be eaten as is. They were ordered to kill any insects that got through the cracks.

At Nianzhen's house, there was too much to fit, so they started storing grain in the shrine. There, the cracks were so packed with earth that hardly any air got in.

Every house worthy of the name was sprinkled with pesticide, not that they knew whether it would do any good. The tents had too many openings to serve as storage areas. Instead, they would be temporary evacuation points for the villagers.

Basen carried a huge net. It might once have been for catching fish, but he swung it around over his head with tremendous speed, gathering up grasshoppers within it. Then he dumped them in a huge bucket of water, killing them.

Chue passed out leather pouches. Instead of food, they contained sweetened goat's milk. She was preparing for a long battle.

Nianzhen wore several overshirts, and the other villagers imitated him.

Rikuson was going from house to house, reassuring the villagers whose anxious voices he could hear through the air holes. Any time he found bugs entering through a gap, he would crush the insects and fill the gap. The duck pecked at the grasshoppers and then spit them out again. Inedible, perhaps.

Then the villagers started screaming.

Everything seemed to grow darker, passing from bright and clear to

ash, and then a gray that reminded Maomao of a rat, until everything was practically black.

It was impossible to open one's eyes, never mind walk. Bugs bumped into people, bit and tore at them. People couldn't open their mouths; it was all they could do to cover them with rags. Their layered overshirts were ripped and torn, and the beating of wings drowned out every other sound. A droning noise overwhelmed everything, so that it was impossible to tell what someone else was saying. Soon, even the screams couldn't be heard anymore.

Maomao covered her face with her hands, then opened her eyes the slightest bit. She could see Basen, still swinging the net over his head. It filled almost instantly, whereupon he slammed it against the ground. The bucket had long ago overflowed with grasshoppers.

One man had gone mad from the bug bites. He howled at the top of his lungs and swung a torch in one hand and a scythe in the other. It did him no good; the grasshoppers survived his counterattack and continued to assault the villagers.

Chue crept up to the crazed man and swept his feet out from under him. The moment he was on the ground, she bound him with a rope.

Rikuson was still running from house to house, shouting. Some people were driven out of their minds by the disappearance of the light. Others were sane but simply couldn't hear him.

Fire burst from one of the houses, and an elderly woman and some children came rushing out of the otherwise sealed structure. One of the kids held a flint.

The freshly harvested wheat in the house was perfect fuel, and the fire burned readily. The parched air of the dry season made conditions even better for the flames.

Basen reacted immediately, giving one of the posts of the house a kick. The place was barely more than a shack to begin with, and it promptly collapsed.

Maomao could hear Basen shouting, although she couldn't catch the words. Maybe he was saying that the water source was too far away to fight the flames and they needed to destroy the house. He was in his element in moments of crisis.

He had already practically knocked the place down on his own; now he rushed over with the bucket full of floating grasshoppers and emptied it over the house. Chue spirited away the snotty children and the old lady to

the tent. It was crawling with grasshoppers, just like everywhere else, but it was better than being outside.

How much time had passed? Maomao didn't know. It might have been thirty minutes. It might have been hours.

Everyone in the village quaked at the bugs, the like of which they had never seen; they reviled the creatures, and—

"Maomao!"

She thought she felt someone tap her on the shoulder. She turned and found Rikuson. Grasshoppers were chewing on his hair, on his clothes. She reached up, thinking to brush them away.

"Please, stop making pesticide. Your hand will be useless!"

She looked at the hand she had raised; it was red and swollen.

Oh...

Her concoction couldn't provide any relief from this swarm. She'd been mixing up pesticide and spreading it around as fast as she could, putting it everywhere she could think of, but it was never enough; the grasshoppers just kept coming.

Why? Why didn't it work?

It did work. There were simply too many of them. The starving insects even ate the poisonous herbs. They bit people, chewed on clothing, and even tried to consume house posts. As if that weren't enough, the bugs that had fallen to the ground began eating each other. There were too many of them, and it had driven them into a frenzy.

Maomao was pretty far gone herself, desperately grabbing every herb that could help fight the insects and stewing them up. Grasshoppers floated in the huge pot. Maomao pulled up plants roots and all and threw them in. Was her hand swollen from tearing plants out of the ground barehanded, or from the toxic qualities of the pesticide?

Rikuson looked at the sky, still dark with the swarm. The insects were everywhere, but he seemed to be looking somewhere beyond them, above them.

"They say disaster drives out disaster... We should be so lucky."

Maomao didn't know what he meant, but she stared into the darkness herself.

"Ow!" she exclaimed. Something hard had smacked into her. She looked at the ground, wondering what it could have been, and found a

lump of ice.

The pain came again, on her back this time, then on her shoulder.

Thock, thock, thock.

The air had gotten very cold.

“Hail?” she said.

Between the large chunks of ice and the freezing air, the grasshoppers began to move visibly slower.

“Disaster drives out disaster, huh?” Maomao said. No, this was no disaster. This was a gift from heaven—not a conclusion Maomao would normally reach. “Yes! Fall! Let it hail on us!”

Now her madness was speeding in another direction. She leaned forward, as the hail fell among the swarm. Not a rain dance, as it were, but a hail dance.

She didn’t feel the pain of the bugs biting at her, nor of the hail striking her. She was too full of the wish, the hope, that something, anything, might happen to help them with this numberless swarm of insects.

Thock! She felt an especially heavy blow, right to her head this time.

“Maomao!”

She remembered Rikuson running over to her, but then everything went black.

Chapter 19: Scratches

Her vision came back, but it was hazy.

Huh? What was I doing, again?

Maomao sat up slowly; her body felt heavy.

"H'lo there! You awake?" said an upbeat voice. It was accompanied by a familiar face.

"M-Master Lihaku?"

It was the big, friendly mutt of a soldier. Maomao looked around, trying to make her brain work. She wasn't in a room, but a tent. To one side, she could see Chue stewing something in a pot.

That was all well and good—but then she saw an insect at the edge of her vision. She jumped to her feet. "Grasshopper!" she cried, immediately crushing it underfoot. Having only just woken up, however, the motion nearly made her fall down.

"Whoa! Hey, young lady. Killing one grasshopper won't make any difference, okay? And you've got to take it slow," Lihaku said.

"He's very right, Miss Maomao. Here, eat this." Chue sat her back down on the bed and offered her a bowl of something. She took it and ate a bite. It was a rice pudding, faintly salty.

Once Maomao had some warm food in her, the memories started to come back. *There was a swarm of grasshoppers, and then a hailstorm, and then...*

"How long was I out?" she asked.

"One whole day," Chue replied. "You took a good whack on the head from a big piece of hail. I was afraid it would be dangerous to move you, so we put you here in this tent."

Maomao thought she had made the right choice. She also felt downright pathetic, falling unconscious right when they needed her most.

Sounds like I was in pretty bad shape.

Maomao was only human. No one would blame her if the unprecedented situation had pushed her over the edge. But it was still true that in succumbing she had made life harder for the others.

And to think, the taibon *didn't bother me.* The locked room full of snakes and venomous insects in the Shi clan fortress had been no problem

at all.

"There's no need to feel down, Miss Maomao. You just got a little confused and took the bug-killing a bit too far. Your Cat-brand pesticide is on the strong side. Might poison the earth, you know. But it worked! We've thinned it down and now they're using it to kill the rest of the bugs."

"The rest of them?"

"The short version is, we're on the other side of this. It helped a lot that the hail came and dropped the temperature. But some of those grasshoppers are hardy little stinkers, so they're out there dealing with them."

"I'm helping with that," Lihaku chimed in, raising his hand. Why *was* he here? "A swarm of grasshoppers showed up in the western capital too. Not as many as here, but it's been ugly. Our good buddy Jinshi is beside himself—he ordered me to go to the village you were at right away, little lady. I got here about half a day ago."

"Meanwhile, my silly little brother went back to attend the Moon Prince. This has been your report on the situation!"

This was probably the most Jinshi could do. Basen, meanwhile, would presumably still be full of vim and vigor, even after a fast ride back.

"Boy, it was something!" Lihaku said. "Those guys in the western capital, it looked like they'd never seen an insect plague before. I mean, neither have I, right? But they warned us something was coming. They warned us over and over!"

Lihaku was, as his appearance suggested, stout of heart. He had been an excellent choice for this expedition.

"Oh, right!" he added. "The old fart was there too—he was all, 'Maomaoooo! Where's my Maomaaaoooo?!' Boy, did he go wild! The poor old doctor was cowering in the medical office!"

"Ugh..." Maomao could imagine the freak strategist's reaction all too well.

"Our buddy Jinshi, he really thought on his feet I guess, because he said not to worry, because he'd sent you somewhere there's no plague. Biggest lie I ever heard!"

"When I was literally on the front lines..." Granted, Maomao had volunteered for it, but the lie was convenient, no question.

"The old fart organized a grasshopper extermination squad. He helped control the chaos in the city too."

Maomao didn't respond immediately. It actually sounded like things were more or less under control in the western capital. It was the other farming villages that worried her.

Speaking of which...

"Lahan's Brother—is he okay?" she wondered aloud.

"Ohh, you mean Potato Guy?"

"If he hasn't sent any letters, that's probably good news, right?" Chue said.

"I don't know. The last thing he sent sounded pretty bad, and now here we are with grasshoppers everywhere..."

As ordinary farmers went, he was quite distinguished, but he'd been pressed into service on this expedition, then sent into the teeth of the oncoming swarm.

Thank you, Lahan's Brother... Maomao looked at the ceiling of the tent. She tried to picture Lahan's Brother's smiling face, but then she realized she wasn't sure she'd ever seen him smile. He was usually either angry, or at his wits' end, or quipping at somebody.

I wonder if he's even still alive. She knew he'd been sent with trustworthy bodyguards, so she wanted to believe he'd survived all this.

"You wouldn't happen to know the extent of the damage, would you?" she asked. The swarm had come and gone; that couldn't be changed now. The question was how they would respond.

"About eighty percent of the wheat harvest was in," Chue informed her. "The unharvested wheat was destroyed, but it was a bumper crop this year, bigger than average. Subtract the wheat from the one house that burned down, and the harvest comes out to about seventy percent of a normal year."

"Seventy percent?" Considering the scale of the destruction, that sounded almost miraculous to Maomao. Maybe Lahan's Brother really was that good a teacher and guide. They couldn't think exclusively in terms of wheat, though. "What about other damage?" she asked.

"Most of the straw was eaten, and so was most of the pasture grass for the animals. The potato fields have pretty much been reduced to stems, but we think they might grow back."

Chue made it sound so simple, but she must have been uncomfortable with the gravity of the situation, because flowers and flags kept popping in and out of her hands. Lihaku watched her raptly, never seeming to tire of the display.

“Let’s be honest—the other farming villages are probably pretty much annihilated,” said Chue.

“Good old Jinshi keeps sending post-horses to the nearest village every time he gets a letter from Lahan’s Brother, but I’ll bet most places weren’t prepared as well as this one was,” Lihaku added.

“Good point. Things didn’t get *too* chaotic around here,” Chue said.

So this was “not too chaotic,” huh? Maomao had thought she was inured to a certain amount of pandemonium, but it seemed Chue was even more composed than she was.

And there was still the matter of the person who had done more than anyone on this occasion...

“Where’s Rikuson?”

“Outside, I think. Wanna see him?” Chue asked.

In the midst of the turmoil, Rikuson had remained completely calm. In fact, he had looked downright used to it. He’d done more than simply keep his wits and kill grasshoppers—he’d seemed to understand on a deep level how people in a panic would act. What he’d done, running from one house to another and talking to the villagers, might not have looked like much, but without it, it was possible that much more grain would have burned.

Even after Maomao’s stern warnings not to use fire, the villagers had still done so. Trapped in suffocating, lightless houses, with frenzied voices screaming outside, anyone would have been pushed to the edge.
Maomao’s saw now how important it was to have a level voice come from outside.

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What's his story? she wondered as she left the tent. Chue followed, perhaps to keep an eye on her.

It was chilly outside, a lingering effect of the hailstorm. Grasshoppers still crawled along the ground, and a few people were trying to catch those that were still in the air. In the center of the village was a hideous black pile of what Maomao assumed were collected bugs. It seemed to be writhing ever so slightly, and she didn't want to get too close.

The villagers who had been shut up in their houses were filtering out into the streets, stunned. When they'd left the wheat fields, taking the ears into their homes, they had been full of stalks—but now they were devastated and worthless. Even though she had heard Chue's report on the damage, Maomao struggled to comprehend the reality in front of her eyes. She passed the potato fields, reduced to stems, and saw for herself the bald pastures.

The grass fields were less thoroughly destroyed than the wheat, but it was a matter of degree. The animals had been let out into the fields, but seemed restive and uneasy. Chickens pecked at the grasshoppers here and there on the ground.

Wonder if they taste good? Maomao had in fact tried some herself once, but she couldn't get over the way they looked—they just didn't appear tasty.

The duck was staring this way and that, surveying the area. Looking for Basen, maybe.

"Aren't you curious how the grasshoppers taste, Miss Maomao?"

"I'm sorry, Miss Chue?"

Maomao had a bad feeling about this.

"I whipped this up—just to see if it was edible!" She produced some sort of stir-fry. It was very Chue-esque, to pull it out of thin air like that, and she seemed to have read Maomao's mind.

Maomao didn't say anything.

"I got rid of the heads, carapaces, and legs—didn't seem good for the digestion. I threw out the innards too—never know what they've been eating."

We need hardly explain what this foodstuff was—although Chue had managed to completely disguise it.

"You made the right choice, taking out the guts. They ate poisonous grasses and even each other. But once you've taken all that out, I'm not sure what's left."

“You’re so right—there’s so little of them you can eat! Anyway, dig in!”

Maomao took an unenthusiastic bite.

“What do you think?”

“Hmm... Well, it’s not physically *in*edible...”

“But given the amount of work that goes into preparing it, you’d suggest something else.”

“Yes, I’d say so.”

This was Chue’s cooking, so it was bound to have some pretty nice seasonings. The fact that, in spite of that, it still only rose to the level of “not inedible” did not speak well for the merits of this dish. Nor were the people standing and staring vacantly at fields devastated by the grasshoppers likely to want to turn around and eat them. The nutrition they afforded would be small compensation for the damage they had done.

The rest of Chue’s dish disappeared back into thin air, then she tugged on Maomao’s sleeve as if she had noticed something. “This way, please!” she said.

Maomao followed her along until they stopped in front of one of the savaged houses. She could hear voices inside. When she looked in, she found Rikuson talking with some villagers.

“I understand,” he was saying. “We’ll pretend this never happened.”

“I’m very sorry. I hate to go back on a promise, even an informal one.” Several villagers, along with the headman himself, bowed their heads to Rikuson.

“No, I understand. Considering the scale of the destruction, I can’t blame you. In fact, I consider us fortunate that the damage wasn’t any worse.”

One look at the bag sitting on the table between the parties was enough to explain what they were talking about. It was the same one Rikuson had used to motivate the complacent villagers before the swarm arrived—the bag full of money. He’d promised to buy their wheat at double the market price.

This can’t be the only village that’s suffered this sort of destruction. And I guess they can’t afford to sell their surplus.

“Good day, sir.” Rikuson put the bag in the folds of his robe and left the house. As he came out, he saw Maomao. “Maomao, you’re awake? Are you all right?”

She showed him her head and palms. Her head felt fine, but her hand

still throbbed. Chue had tended to it while she was unconscious, though, applying a salve and bandaging it, so it was better than it could have been.

Chue gave Rikuson a nudge. “You’ve got some guts carrying that thing around, Mister Moneybags! You know there could be bandits around here, right?”

“Oh, heavens. I’m merely a middling bureaucrat. I don’t have the money to buy an entire village’s wheat supply.” He stuck out his tongue playfully and then took out the bag. It was full of Go stones.

“Well, well!” Chue said.

“I carry them with me everywhere. A habit from my last position.”

That, of course, would have been as aide to the freak strategist. Rikuson, Maomao thought, had proved himself to be a first-class con man.

“I’m sorry. Did you need something with me?” he asked.

Need something? Hmm.

She’d mostly just followed Chue. Chue and Lihaku between them had given her a pretty good idea of where things stood, so there was no real need to ask Rikuson about it. She did think, though, that Rikuson was probably the one who had been the most shocked when she was knocked unconscious. She felt she should apologize.

“I’m terribly sorry for getting knocked out like that. I was one more problem when you already had enough to deal with.” She bowed to Chue too, just for good measure.

“Not at all. I’m just glad you’re not seriously hurt.”

“All right, then. See you.”

“What? Is that all?”

“Is that all?” Well, there were other things she wanted to ask Rikuson, but there was no need to rush. There were still a lot of grasshoppers around, and she thought she should stay out of the way. Maybe Rikuson was tired of thinking about grasshoppers, and wanted a change of subject. Unfortunately, Maomao was in no better position than he was to come up with something distracting.

Instead she said, “You seem to have a very good idea what you’re doing here, Rikuson. Do you have some sort of experience with this kind of thing?” The way he had kept his head the whole time—even being the former aide to the freak strategist wouldn’t give you that kind of composure.

Rikuson gave her a gentle smile. “I learned it from my mother. You must never lose sight of yourself no matter what the situation, she said.”

Then, for a second, his expression faltered. “Her last words to me were ‘When you most want to break down, that’s when you must be most calm.’”

“Her last words?”

“Yes... Our house was attacked by brigands. My mother and older sister hid me where I wouldn’t be found...and then they were killed before my eyes.”

This conversation had abruptly turned much darker than Maomao had expected.

“If I made a sound, I would have been killed too. But I couldn’t—couldn’t cry out, couldn’t yell. My mother, knowing very well that I would have screamed my rage and tried to jump on the killers, stuffed a gag in my mouth and bound me hand and foot. So it was that, unable to do anything, I watched my mother and sister die—but because of that, I survived.”

That wasn’t an easy story to respond to. Maomao replied in the only way she could think of. “Because you survived, so did this village.”

Whatever had happened in the past was no concern of hers—but if, as a result of his experiences, Rikuson was able to save this village, then she had to be grateful for those experiences. And, too, she had to acknowledge his uncommon courage.

“I appreciate that, Maomao—that way of looking at it.”

“Oh?”

She wasn’t Rikuson. She had no way of knowing how he would have reacted if she’d responded with an excess of emotion. He was a grown man, not some sullen teenage girl, so she’d figured there was no need to shower him with fulsome sympathy.

Rikuson smiled again. “I feel like you and I get along quite well, Maomao. Do you think I could seek your hand in marriage?”

“Surely you jest,” she said. She wasn’t about to take his polite banter seriously.

“Yes, of course. Surely,” Rikuson said, and chuckled.

I’m not sure I realized he was the type to make that kind of joke, Maomao thought, surprised. Then again, he’d said something similar last year, the last time they’d been in the western capital. Maybe this was just another side of him.

Chue poked her head into the conversation. “Wow-ow! Are you going to leave Miss Chue out in the cold? Is there room for one more in your

little relationship drama?"

"Miss Chue is a married woman," Rikuson said mildly.

"Yes! Married with child! But everyone says I don't look it. How'd you know?" Chue gave him a puzzled cock of the head.

She really doesn't *look it.* Chue was far, far removed from Maomao's idea of an ordinary housewife.

"Well, you see, the eldest son of the Ma clan is famous in certain circles."

"Oh, yes! My husband passed the civil service exam when he was in his teens—that's enough to make anyone famous. Sad to say, he quit pretty quick, though. Thanks to him, Miss Chue had to go right back to work after the birth!" She placed her hands together.

"And what's become of your child? It can't be very old yet, can it?" Rikuson asked.

"My sister-in-law is taking excellent care of it!"

Maomao had been aware of the existence of this child, in general terms, but now she found that Chue didn't seem to be remotely concerned about her offspring. Maomao realized that not only had she never heard the child's name, she didn't even know whether it was a boy or a girl. Even knowing that Chue's sister-in-law, Maamei, would no doubt do an excellent job raising the child, her approach seemed laissez-faire in the extreme.

"All right, I have to get back to helping with the grasshoppers," Rikuson said with a polite bow of his head.

"Okay. I'll—"

Just as Maomao was wondering what, in fact, she would do, a voice came from behind her.

"Heeey!" She turned to find Nianzhen waving at her. What did the one-eyed old man want? "Y'have any more of that poison?"

"Poison?" Maomao gave him a questioning look.

"The one that kills bugs! The one you boiled up in that big pot. I'm gettin' nowhere crushing insects one at a time. I want to scatter that stuff on everything and wipe them out."

"Oh! You mean the pesticide." Maomao had a hazy memory of her desperate quest to make the stuff.

"Right! The poison!"

"Poison..."

Maomao wanted to point out that that wasn't exactly what it was, but

Rikuson stopped as he was leaving to say, “Yes, that poison was astoundingly effective.”

“All right, hold on...”

“Oh! It’s the Poison Lady!” said one of the villagers who had spotted Maomao. “Think you could whip up some more poison for us?”

“Yes, I need some poison, please. The kind you have to thin out to keep it from killing anyone!” said another villager.

“That poison worked like nothing I’ve ever seen. What in the world was in it?”

The villagers crowded around her.

It’s not p-p-p...

Before Maomao could get the words out, Chue clapped her on the shoulder. She gave her a knowing look and shook her head. Maomao swallowed hard.

“Please, use it only as directed,” she said.

And so Maomao found herself gathering toxic herbs once again.

About the time Maomao had made a generous quantity of pesticide, Lihaku called, “Heeey, little lady!”

“Yes? What’s the matter?”

“Looks like you’re all set making your poison. I thought maybe instead of sticking around here, we should head back to the western capital to report in. I can leave the soldiers who came out here with me to help clear away the rest of the bugs. Sound all right?”

“Yeah, might be a good idea... And by the way, this isn’t poison, it’s pesticide.”

Maomao looked out at the village. She’d shown the farmers how to make the pesticide, and even written simple instructions for them.

“If we don’t hurry back, that old fart’s gonna figure out he’s been had,” Lihaku said.

“Oh, right. He was told I was somewhere there was no plague, wasn’t he? I’m impressed he believed it.”

However crazed he might have been, the freak strategist’s inexplicable sixth sense always seemed to be up and running. Strange to think someone had successfully lied to him.

“Our buddy Jinshi is no mean tactician himself. He used the ol’ doctor.”

The ol’ doctor. In other words, the quack. Maomao knew Jinshi had

been making nice with the physician recently. She wondered how he had used him.

"He explained to the ol' doctor what was going on with you, and let *him* let the old fart know. Y'know, he told him indirectly!"

Maomao went quiet: that really *was* a good idea. Also, *the ol' doctor* this and *the old fart* that seemed like it could get confusing.

The quack doctor was a pudgy, middle-aged man, but in zoological terms he was sort of in the same category as mice or squirrels. He occupied roughly the same place in the hierarchy as Basen's duck.

"Once things have quieted down, we need to show up in a hurry or the old fart will start to smell something fishy."

Maomao looked at her palm. It was still visibly marred from making the pesticide. "What do we do about this?" she asked.

"I have a little change of clothes for you!" Chue said, promptly producing them.

"Just tell everyone something went a bit wrong, y'know? You've already got all that stuff on your left arm," Lihaku said, gesturing at the offending appendage, which was covered in scars from Maomao using herself as a test subject for her medicines. She'd never specifically mentioned it, but apparently he had figured it out.

Come to think of it...

As overprotective as the freak strategist could seem, he'd never once objected to her being a food taster, checking for poison. He would instantly put the screws to anyone who threatened to harm Maomao in the slightest way—but maybe he chose not to interfere when it came to threats Maomao chose for herself.

She wondered if Lihaku had one of his instinctive reads on that aspect of the strategist.

"Good point," she said. She figured he was right: no one would question a minor injury to her hands at this point. "All right. Shall we go home?"

So she put the devastated village behind her.

Chapter 20: Confirmation

When she got back to the western capital, she found it in a bad state.

Things really were worse here, she thought. She surveyed the city with a sense of detachment. There were still grasshoppers on the roads and crawling along the walls of buildings. Sometimes she saw black clumps squirming, but she chose not to look too closely.

She suspected the actual number of grasshoppers was less than it had been in the village, but she could see chewed-up street stalls and gnawed fruit on the ground everywhere.

City folk don't cope well with insects.

The people here had probably reacted to the swarm very differently than the villagers. She saw hardly anyone outside. The farmers had their crops to think of, so they tried to exterminate the bugs to keep the plants safe, but simple fear ruled the inhabitants of the western capital.

"How bad was the chaos?" she asked Lihaku, who was sitting on the driver's bench. Rikuson had said he would stay in the village for a few more days. That was all well and good for the villagers, but Maomao was surprised that he didn't feel he should return to the western capital to deal with this emergency.

"It was bedlam. Rain and hail!"

"Didn't anyone warn them the swarm was coming?" If Jinshi had managed to send word even to her, he must have had some plan in place in the capital.

Lihaku, however, said, "This is the western capital. There's an order to things, y'know?"

"I see..."

Jinshi could hardly run through the streets shouting at the top of his lungs. Unlike Maomao, he had his position to think of. He could do nothing unless he did it through the officials here in the city.

"Looks like he did better than *nothing*, though," Lihaku said.

In a large town square, there was what appeared to be a food distribution taking place. Maomao was surprised—had the bugs really caused that much damage and exhaustion? It had been several days, though. Not every household was going to have extensive provisions on

hand.

A lot of poor families are living hand to mouth to begin with. Often, it was the best they could do to earn a day's wage, then spend it at a stall for dinner that night. A handful of places to eat were still open, but in the chaos, distribution networks had dried up, and they didn't have much to serve.

Maomao could smell the congee being passed out even from where she was. The smell made her think: *Lahan's Brother.*

It was the smell of sweet potatoes, maybe from the huge supply that had come with her and the others on the ships. The potatoes were being cooked and served to fill the bellies of the starving townsfolk.

"So they're using up the potatoes on this distribution," Maomao observed.

"Oh, Lahan's Brother, we hardly knew ye... It hurts so much to lose him..." Chue's eyes brimmed with tears. She was treating him like he was dead?

"I'd say if they're coming in useful, that's fine, isn't it? I'm sure Potato Guy is out there somewhere, smiling," said Lihaku.

Out there? Where would that be? From the way Lihaku talked, it was hard to tell if he thought Lahan's Brother was alive or dead.

The carriage arrived at the annex. People gathered at the gate when they heard the whinnying of the horses. Specifically, the people were the quack and Tianyu.

"Young lady! You're back!" An exhausted-looking, haggard man raced up to Maomao. Lihaku grabbed him by the scruff of the neck before he could collide with her. The little guy struggled and flailed—it was the quack doctor.

"Master Physician, are you all right?" Maomao said with a bow. Lihaku put the quack back on the ground.

"What about you, young lady? You're all right, aren't you? I know you were somewhere safe, but you must have been so scared! I certainly was! I would have sworn the world was coming to an end!"

"Yes, sir. I know you faint at the sight of a cockroach."

He'd come to her white as a sheet more than once after encountering a particularly vicious bug while cleaning. A swarm of grasshoppers must have been a living hell for him.

"It's not fair, Niangniang. Why did you get to evacuate? Man, it must be great having real connections!" Tianyu was as full of sarcasm as ever,

although Maomao wasn't sure how far he actually believed what Jinshi had said.

"Are you sure it's all right to leave the medical office empty?" Maomao asked. That was, truly and sincerely, the first thing on her mind when she saw them.

"Ahh, we're not that busy," Tianyu said. "Maybe 'cause we're mostly supposed to take care of the Moon Prince. Dr. You and the others, now, *they* have a lot to do!"

The two of them have time on their hands because they're in charge of Jinshi? Something about that seemed strange.

"That reminds me, young lady! Master Lakan was *so* very worried about you!"

"Oh."

That was not especially useful information.

"He seems to have quite a sweet tooth. You should take some mashed sweet potato treats and go say hello to him. He was ravenous for them the other day!"

She wished she could ignore the good doctor's suggestion, but if she did, she suspected the other party would only come visit her instead. Anyway, she had a bigger problem: the quack was taking advantage of Lahan's Brother's absence to cook their seed potatoes.

"Gracious, young lady, you're hurt! What in the world happened to your hand?"

"Oh, it's nothing to worry about. I was making pesticide. It's from experiments with that."

"Experiments? You're not an insect, young lady!" The quack looked genuinely perplexed.

"If it can kill a cat, it'll work for sure on a bug," Tianyu interjected.

"All right, you two, that's enough chatter," Chue said as she came into the room. "We have *lots* we want to tell you!"

"Tell us?" the quack said.

"About this bug-killing concoction."

"Ahh, yes, of course. Sorry, sorry." The quack politely made way. Tianyu didn't look like he was going to be a problem—he'd only shown up to make smart remarks.

Many important people, not just Gyokuen, lived in excessively large houses, but Jinshi's chambers were located in the innermost sanctum of this one. That was all very respectful to him as a guest, but frankly, it was

a real hike.

"All right, nobody's clothes are rumpled? Excellent," Chue said, inspecting Maomao's and Lihaku's outfits. Maomao saw a stray hair or two on Chue's head, so she patted it down.

"Excuse me, we're he—" Maomao said, but she was interrupted by a tremendous crash the moment they entered.

Jinshi was sitting in a somewhat less than formal posture. Suiren and Taomei attended him as usual, while Gaoshun and Basen were there too, both looking a bit uncomfortable. "Quack!" quacked the duck next to them. Would it be better to say something quippy about the bird, or not?

Basen had left the duck behind, and she had returned with Maomao and the others. The way she'd gone straight back to Basen the moment they'd arrived at the annex—she was more like a dog than a duck.

Seems like Gaoshun's sort of thing, Maomao thought. Contrary to appearances, he had a soft spot for sweet treats and small animals. He probably found the duck's presence healing.

Okay, can't spend all my time looking at the duck.

She glanced at Lihaku to ask how they would handle the report. He took a half step back—apparently he wanted her to do the talking. Chue likewise retreated.

"We've just returned, sir," Maomao said, standing a little straighter and talking a little more properly because Taomei was there. *If it were just Gaoshun or Suiren, that would be one thing...*

"Very good," Jinshi said with an air of detached authority. He seemed to feel the same way as Maomao, because his face wore his proverbial "Moon Prince" mask. Taomei had been one of Jinshi's nursemaids, Maomao gathered, but her...*approach* to child-rearing had been rather different from Suiren's.

"And how was it?" he asked.

A fair question, but about all Maomao could do was repeat what she had heard from Chue. "The harvest was severely impacted, but not annihilated. As far as the wheat goes, we think there's about seventy percent of a normal year's harvest left."

"Then Lahan's Brother's message reached you in time."

He even calls him that in official meetings?

Maybe even Jinshi didn't know the man's name. If he never came back, Maomao wondered what they would put on his tombstone.

"We dispatched messengers to the other villages, but by all accounts,

we saved less than half the harvest. And there are some places the messengers haven't come back from yet—I can only assume things are worse there."

As hard as he had worked, Lahan's Brother simply couldn't reach everyone in time. Worse, no matter how much he had endured for the sake of the villages he did reach, the rest would simply assume the higher-ups had ignored and abandoned them. Struggle as he might, Lahan's Brother was never going to reach the finish line.

"Lihaku. How many people do you think we need to send to each village?" Jinshi asked.

"I'd say at least ten, sir. We'll need some to take care of the bugs and some to help rebuild the houses, but the thing that worries me most is..."

"Violence? Or brigandage?"

"Both, really."

Natural disasters like this turned life upside down for people—and that tended to do the same to the human heart. A ravaged heart could soon turn to thievery or violence. Jinshi was already thinking about what came after the grasshoppers.

Poink! went Chue's unruly hair—she seemed to think Jinshi might ask her opinion, but she never got a turn to talk.

"Very well. You've done good work, Lihaku. You can return to your post," Jinshi said.

"Sir," Lihaku replied smartly, and left the room. The duck, for reasons unknown, followed him. Her rump quivered as she went—maybe she needed to poop.

Can ducks be housebroken?

Maomao would have assumed that was impossible, but then again, if the animal desecrated Jinshi's chambers, Taomei was apt to roast her on the spot. Maybe the duck, sensing mortal danger, had decided to go outside. If so, it was an impressive trick.

Maomao turned to follow them, but immediately found Suiren blocking her exit.

"Can I help you?" Maomao asked.

"Ho ho ho. Perhaps you'd spare us just a little more of your time."

When she put it that way, Maomao had no choice but to do an about-face.

Jinshi was no longer wearing his Moon Prince expression. "Is your head all right?" he asked. Basen must have told him about the wayward

piece of hail and Maomao's subsequent bout of unconsciousness. When she looked closely, she could see dark bags under Jinshi's eyes, and his lips were dry.

"I'm not sure, sir. Sometimes a person drops dead out of the blue a few days after being hit on the head." Even if there were no external wounds, bleeding inside the head could, apparently, still cause death.

"Then you need to be lying down!"

"No, sir. My time will come when it comes, and about the only person who could do anything about it would be my father." Him, or perhaps Dr. Liu, but neither was here in the western capital. "So I would prefer to do what I can, while I can."

"Explain that right hand, then." He seemed to have noticed Maomao's bandages.

"Scars from an experiment," she said slowly.

"I thought you didn't use your dominant hand for that." He gave her a long, hard look—the reverse of their usual positions. At length he said, "Hrm. Well, fine. More importantly...you're all right. That's what matters."

Oh...

She saw how his hand clenched and unclenched, and realized the "Moon Prince" had reverted entirely to Jinshi. It was almost childlike—and indeed, distressingly human.

"You must be tired. You should return to your room and get some rest."

Now that, Maomao was grateful to hear. Chue threw her hands in the air in celebration, until she saw the look on her mother-in-law's face and put them down again.

Maomao was eager to go back to her room, but there was one thing she needed to know. "Master Jinshi, are you not doing anything about the swarm yourself?"

It might not sound like a very respectful question—and it wouldn't help that she'd slipped back to calling him Jinshi instead of "Moon Prince." But after all his planning and preparation for how to deal with the plague of insects, surely he shouldn't be lounging in his guest suite right now. Maomao pressed the point: "In these unprecedented times, surely there's much that you could still be doing, sir?"

Her point seemed to get across.

"As you know, I am a *guest* here," Jinshi said, returning to his official

tone. “What I can personally do on the ground is limited. So I prepared a gift for those who *can* do whatever they wish.”

Maomao recalled the sweet potato congee being distributed in the marketplace.

“I saw sweet potato congee being passed out,” she said.

“Good to know they’re using it as intended.”

“Using it?”

Jinshi had already given the provisions to the western capital. It would be the capital’s ruler who got the goodwill for handing them out. The townspeople’s gratitude would be directed toward whoever had given them the food.

He’s plucked this moment right out of Jinshi’s hands! Jinshi had done all the work, but Gyoku-ou would get all the credit.

“It’s also clear enough why they allowed me to send messengers to the villages at my will. If nothing happened, they would get to blame the Imperial younger brother for trying to stir the people up. And if something did happen, the western capital would still be seen to have sent word.”

Jinshi was a far more straightforward person than he looked at first glance, and he put the nation first without regard for faction or alliance. He could be a terribly useful pawn if someone knew how to play him.

Then this convenient catastrophe had arrived.

“These westerners seem to have planned all along to use us central visitors as their errand boys and girls. We were at least saved from the worst of it in that the honored strategist took the fore.”

“B-But...”

There were people who found this more painful than Maomao. Basen remained resolutely expressionless, while Suiren and Taomei looked less than cheerful. Gaoshun, meanwhile, was nursing a very deep furrow in his brow.

“This seems to be the true reason I was summoned here—to serve as a convenient foil,” Jinshi said.

Astoundingly, the interim ruler of the western capital, Gyoku-ou, was trying to use the Imperial younger brother as his own supporting actor. *Is he trying to make himself the hero of this story?* Maomao clenched her fist as she realized what was going on.

They were going to be in the western capital for a while. Gyoku-ou might have been Empress Gyokuyou’s brother, but even so, Maomao had the feeling she was never going to learn to like him very much.

Meanwhile, Jinshi, who seemed to keep drawing the short straw, couldn't hide his mounting exhaustion from those closest to him.

He needs to get some sleep, and soon.

Maomao was just about to try to bring an end to the conversation when Suiren called, "Basen, your duck is making a racket outside!"

"Jofu? Is something wrong?"

"That masked owl is back. Maybe returning it to the wild wasn't so easy..."

"It's used to humans now," Taomei said, breaking into a smile at the mention of the owl. Maomao was sure now: Taomei appreciated the bird as a fellow predator.

"Do you think you could go take a look? You know how to handle that thing, don't you?" Suiren said.

"When you put it that way, I suppose..." Masterpiece of a woman though she might have been, even Taomei had to give in the face of a veteran lady-in-waiting like Suiren. Basen, worried about his duck, hurried outside too. It was already dark, so Chue lit a lantern. The sweet smell of honey floated through the air.

"Miss Chue, perhaps you'd help me with dinner preparations?" Suiren said.

"Oh, yes, *certainly*!" Chue replied, somehow theatrically.

Suiren gave Maomao a wink.

I get it. Real nice.

Without prompting, Gaoshun trotted out after them. He would be nearby, so as to come quickly if he were needed.

Once the two of them were alone in the room, Maomao took a deep breath, then heaved a sigh. "Master Jinshi."

"Yes?"

"Don't you think you're pushing yourself too hard?"

The last vestiges of the Moon Prince vanished. "Is there ever a time when I'm not?"

From the moment he had been born a member of the Imperial family, *freedom* had not been a word in his vocabulary. Maomao realized she had simply asked the obvious.

"How much more 'too hard' can you push yourself, then?" There had to be a limit to how much Jinshi could take.

"You ask tough questions. We don't know where the limit is until we find it, do we?"

“Most people who ruin themselves beyond repair do it at work, while continually swearing they can keep going.”

That left Jinshi quiet for a moment, but his face darkened. “Isn’t that what an apothecary is for? To make them better?”

“Yes, sir. More or less. Shall I prepare an herbal bath for you?”

“No...” Jinshi held out his hand.

Huh?

Maomao stared at it, trying to decide if it had some significance. His hand was large, the fingers long. The nails were neatly clipped and filed.

The large hand stretched a little farther and placed itself on Maomao’s head.

Yikes!

He mussed her hair as if he were petting a dog. She tried to slap him away, but he dodged her nimbly.

“What the hell, sir?” she asked, patting her disheveled hair back into place. She hadn’t had a chance to bathe for several days, so it felt thick and greasy.

“I simply made myself better. So I wouldn’t reach my limit so soon.” Jinshi held his head high, as if to say he hadn’t done anything wrong.

“There must be better ways to do that, sir.”

“Is that an invitation to utilize these...ways?”

Neither of them said anything.

Maomao backed away a half step and crossed her arms in an X.

“Tell me about these ‘better’—”

“Okay, I’ve reported everything I have to report! If you’ll excuse me!” And then, with an artful dodge, Maomao ducked out of the room.

Outside, she let out a long breath. *He’s been so indirect lately that I’d forgotten.*

Jinshi’s true personality was to charge ahead. His methods could be brutal. If he had been showing restraint with Maomao, it was only because of the ridiculous way he’d decided to go about this.

Walking around in hopes of clearing her head, Maomao found an owl, a duck, Basen, and, for some reason, even a goat running around outside.

That goat belongs to Miss Chue.

They were turning this annex into a farm.

They have the freedom to do that.

The scene was simultaneously ridiculous and amusing. Maomao felt the edges of her mouth creep upward, and she clenched her fist, vowing to

make more pesticide tomorrow.

She was going to be in the western capital for a while yet. If she was going to tell Jinshi not to push himself too hard, then she should take her own advice.

But still, she would do everything she could. She had to.

Epilogue

Aromatic tea and baked snacks with plenty of butter. A moderately stimulating incense that drew out the richest notes of the sweet smell.

Empress Gyokuyou hosted, and her guests came to be entertained.

She'd held many tea parties during her days in the rear palace, but fewer since she had gone from consort to Empress. She was confident, however, that her ability to coddle a visitor had not diminished.

"Thank you ever so much for inviting us," one of the women said. They were the wives of some of the most important people in Li. They were all older than Gyokuyou, with one exception—her niece, Yaqin.

"And who might this be?" a sharp-eyed guest asked upon spotting her.

"My niece," Gyokuyou replied with a smile. "She's joined us all the way from the western capital."

Yaqin had still not entered the rear palace, as not only Gyokuyou but Gyokuen had objected to her doing so. Gyokuyou's father and her brother wanted different things: this realization made her even less hesitant to act.

She had introduced the girl not as Gyoku-ou's daughter, but as her niece. Nobody would know Gyoku-ou as the governor of the far-off western reaches. He was known in the capital as Gyokuen's son, and little more.

Anyway, Yaqin resembled Gyokuyou more than she did Gyoku-ou. No doubt people would conclude that she was Gyokuyou's niece on her mother's side.

They talked about the most popular perfumes, imported velvet, the newest makeup—subjects that were a bit juvenile considering the age bracket of the attendees. Partly, Gyokuyou deliberately brought up these subjects so that Yaqin, who wasn't used to these sorts of functions yet, would feel comfortable, but it also served to allow her to avoid political discussions.

The main objective today was not to strengthen her ties with these women. In fact, she had gone out of her way to invite well-heeled wives who didn't display too much ambition.

Over these past several months, Yaqin had begun to open up to Gyokuyou. As Gyokuyou had suspected, she was adopted, not her half-

brother's blood child. He must have decided that the Emperor's choice of Gyokuyou as his empress showed that the ruler had a thing for "exotic"-looking women.

Gyokuyou could only laugh.

The Emperor was not a man who would choose his empress for her looks alone. They might have been a factor, of course, but not enough for him to fall madly in love. Gyokuyou might have the Imperial affection, but she was not the kind who could bring a country to its knees.

Her father Gyokuen understood His Majesty well. That was why he hadn't offered a young Gyokuyou to the previous emperor. He had waited, using the time until the throne changed hands to give Gyokuyou the education she would need to be Empress.

He was a merchant, Gyokuen. He would choose the path of greatest profit. He would not be distracted by avarice, though—he would look ten, twenty, fifty years into the future. Even beyond his own death. He would seek more than the modest glory of one clan, Gyokuyou knew.

Gyokuyou had faith that Gyokuen loved her. But his love was not unconditional. If she became a hindrance to his pursuit of gain, he would cut her loose. What Gyokuyou could do was raise her own value, make herself weigh heavier in Gyokuen's scales.

This tea party was one way she could do that.

The party concluded amid a convivial atmosphere. The wives showed great interest in the curious trade goods from the west. Gyokuyou would have to make presents of them soon.

She ordered her ladies-in-waiting to clean up, then went back to her room, accompanied by Yaqin.

"You seem to be learning how to handle yourself at a tea party," Gyokuyou observed.

"Yes, ma'am. Only thanks to you."

"At first, you couldn't bring yourself to say a word!" She chuckled.

"Please, I beg you, don't remind me."

Yaqin was lovely, true enough, but she was ultimately still a "makeshift" daughter. She could make herself sound aristocratic for a few minutes of brief conversation, but much longer than that and her I-sei twang started to come out. Gyokuyou would probably still have the same problem if Hongniang hadn't corrected her every time her own accent had shown itself ever since she was young.

The accent made Yaqin less than suitable for tea parties. In the end, she

had been offered up for one purpose: to gain the romantic interest of the nobility.

“Lady Gyokuyou, may I ask you something?” Yaqin said.

“Go ahead.”

“How fares I-sei Province now?” The young woman couldn’t hide her anxiety.

“Why do you ask? Does something there worry you?” Gyokuyou asked bluntly.

After a second Yaqin replied, “The bugs must be coming soon. I fear for the crop.” She was a very direct young woman—kind at heart, and a quick study. Gyokuyou sympathized with her.

It had been ten days or so before that Yaqin had opened up to Gyokuyou about her real parents—a subject she had no doubt intended to keep strictly to herself.

This girl, so much like Gyokuyou, had a deep respect for Gyoku-ou. In her former life, her family had been nomads, but when her father grew ill, they settled in a farming village. Of course, that didn’t immediately make them proficient farmers. They let the livestock pasture in a nearby field, and bit by bit they learned how to farm. She described with evident gratitude how the governor had supported them monetarily.

The governor—Gyoku-ou.

Gyoku-ou was not evil in Gyokuyou’s eyes. He simply believed he was always right. Always just. That was why they didn’t get along. She, favored by Gyokuen, contravened his justice. Of this she was well aware.

He was the eldest son, by Gyokuen’s official wife. If he looked down on a girl born later to a concubine, well, that was hardly unique to I-Sei Province. Most men in Li would have done the same.

No, what bothered Gyokuyou was how Gyoku-ou denigrated her appearance. Not her face as such—this wasn’t about whether she was beautiful or ugly. Instead he belittled her red hair, her green eyes. He was a merchant’s son, the one who was supposed to help the western capital flourish as a nexus of trade in the future. Not the best vocation for a xenophobe.

Gyokuen’s policy was in general to be a good neighbor to foreigners. Gyokuyou didn’t understand how Gyoku-ou could respect their father so much while turning his back on one of his most important teachings.

This was the man Yaqin so deeply admired. Some years before, she had been forced to sell herself on account of a bad harvest. Selling a daughter

was hardly unheard of—women were just another commodity in poor households. She'd begun to work as a prostitute.

This was the situation from which Gyoku-ou had plucked Yaqin, adopting her as his daughter. A beautiful story, Gyokuyou thought. She chose not to say what was behind it; she would not tell Yaqin the truth of the matter. She believed it was part of her strength that she did not undermine the girl.

"I certainly think we can expect to hear something from the western capital soon. I'll tell you the moment I learn anything," Gyokuyou said. Then she pulled a hair stick from Yaqin's hair. Feeling her head get lighter, Yaqin let out a breath. "Now get changed, and let's start on our studies. Learning—that's the most important thing you can do to be of help to my honored brother."

"Yes, ma'am."

Yaqin was obedient, a good girl. She respected Gyoku-ou and worried even for the family who had sold her. Even though they had no doubt received more than enough silver to live on from Gyoku-ou—to keep their mouths shut.

As Yaqin left the room to go change, Haku-u entered holding a crumpled piece of paper. "Lady Gyokuyou," she said.

She gave Gyokuyou the paper, which had been folded and twisted so it could travel by pigeon. This particular missive seemed to have been treated even more roughly than usual. Gyokuyou looked at the bird, wondering if it was the one the Moon Prince normally used, but no. This message had come from someone other than His Majesty's younger brother.

"Is this—?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Haku-u had read it already, it seemed. The message contained word that the western capital—in fact, all of I-Sei Province—was beset by a plague of insects. The messy handwriting bespoke the urgency with which it had been written.

Gyokuyou clenched her jaw. "Haku-u."

"I have one message prepared to go by land and another by sea. We have one messenger bird left, if you wish to use it. The western capital is still in confusion, however, and I question whether it would arrive safely."

Even so, it would be far faster than sending word by human hands.

"The bird, please," Gyokuyou said. Then she took out a piece of

particularly sturdy paper. On it she wrote only a single sentence:

As you will.

Then she tucked the letter in some oil paper, attached it to the leg of the pigeon Haku-u had brought, and released the bird. The white creature looked perfect against the bright blue sky.

The sky was so blue here in the central region, in fact, that it was almost hard to imagine that far to the west, it was being blotted out by insects, the bugs ravaging the crop and supplies. Those who couldn't imagine it might sneer to themselves, *What a bunch of crybabies, those westerners. "Ooh! The bugs are going to get me! Boo hoo hoo!"*

Gyokuyou let out a great sigh. Why had she entered the rear palace? For what? Why had her father seen fit to send her here, to the country's central region?

Would Gyokuyou's father continue to love her long into the future?

"All right!" Gyokuyou almost gave herself a slap on the cheek for energy, but Haku-u stopped her.

"Your inner tomboy is showing, ma'am. Not on the face, please."

"Yes, yes."

"And try to sound like you mean it when you answer." Haku-u, her friend from childhood, looked at her sternly.

Gyokuyou took out a new sheet of paper and began writing down what she could do for the western region.

Her fight was just beginning.

Editor's Notes

The *Apothecary Diaries* Diaries
Vol. 10

The Thousand Diversions of Sasha McGlynn

Hey everyone! How did you like volume 10? It felt like it had *everything*, didn't it? Politics. Romance. Action. Intrigue.

Ducks.

Oh, but I forgot to introduce myself! I'm Sasha McGlynn, the editor for *The Apothecary Diaries*. I've had the pleasure of working with the translator, Kevin Steinbach, for over seven years now! In that time, we've forged ourselves into a fine-tuned machine: he turns Japanese text into English, and I give it the ol' spit and shine! I'm the yin to his yang. The X to his Y. The...Gaoshun to his Jinshi? You get the idea.

Kevin did a great job last volume discussing the overall editing process, so I'd like to take some time to go a bit further into the details of what I do. Let you in on something you don't see in the final product. So follow along, won't you? And watch your step; there are rabbit holes everywhere...

As Kevin said last volume, once he's finished translating a part of a novel, he passes the file to me. He's already made notes that will help with my editing, and has flagged any passages that may need discussion.

When editing, there are multiple mini-tasks I'm handling as I go. These include checking for:

- Spelling. Are all the words spelled correctly following our house dictionary, the J-Novel Club style guide, and the series glossary?
- Grammar and punctuation. Are the words in the right order? Is there subject-verb agreement? Is the verb tense correct throughout?
- Voice. Each character tends to speak a certain way and use (or not use) certain vocabulary. For example, when Nianzhen is telling the story about his past, Kevin wrote: *People began to agree that it was as she said: we were the cause of this disaster, for having vitiated the*

ritual observance. I flagged *vitiated* and commented that Nianzhen, with his lowly background, was not likely to use this kind of word choice. We changed it to *interrupted* in the final version: *People began to agree that it was as she said: we were the cause of this disaster, for having interrupted the ritual observance.*

Most of these tasks are fairly superficial; I'm making changes to sentences and paragraphs so the text follows specific rules and the reader isn't taken out of the story by grammatical errors or out-of-character vocabulary choices. Checking spelling and grammar are the absolute minimum an editor does to get the job done; adjusting the voice of the text is a further step that allows the readers to immerse themselves more deeply into a story.

As I make my way through the manuscript doing the general edits I mentioned above, I occasionally come across one of my favorite parts of editing.

Fact-checking!

The Apothecary Diaries is based on the real world, and therefore follows real-world science and logic. When the story presents an idea I'm not confident in, I venture forth and research the topic to ensure that we're using the right words to describe it, and that the information we're providing in the translation is accurate. Natsu Hyuuga, the author, excels at adding flavor to the world of *The Apothecary Diaries*, so my research may be as easy as looking at beauty websites for makeup terminology or as in-depth as learning about treatments for complications during pregnancy. For me, putting the pieces together to understand the right language or approach is a bit like solving a mystery of my own—for a few minutes, I get to be in Maomao's shoes! While what I discover may not make it directly onto the final page, learning more about what the author has written allows us to more easily describe it for English-language readers.

I've Fallen into a Rabbit Hole and I Can't Get Out

Occasionally, though, when doing my research, I dig deep. Perhaps too deep. And sometimes, what I look into is nothing but a quick aside in the text that will ultimately have no impact on the story at large. These are the

trips down rabbit holes. Looking up the meaning of a strange term may lead to learning a bit of weird trivia, which leads to another, which reminds me of that slightly related thing I was thinking about a few weeks ago. For example, one time I looked up pictures of Tang-dynasty kitchens and cooking utensils and ended up selecting color palettes for my walls before I forced myself back to the manuscript.

In honor of all those rabbit holes, I'd like to share some fun facts and search terms I've lost myself in while working on *The Apothecary Diaries*. Perhaps you'll recognize where in the series I must have lost myself; others can only be explained by my twisted sense of curiosity. Regardless, they make for great stories, and who knows? Maybe we'll be able to use what I learned in later volumes.

Trivia:

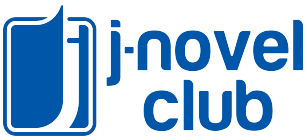
- *Datura stramonium*, known as thornapple in *The Apothecary Diaries*, is also called the zombie cucumber.
- Moving the left arm and the left leg at the same time (or the right arm and the right leg) is called *ipsilateral movement*.
- Most calico cats are female, with only a small percentage being male. Calicos are viewed as lucky in multiple cultures, both Eastern and Western.
- *Autopsy* and *necropsy* are terms used to describe cutting open a body to find the cause of death. *Autopsy* is the term for humans; *necropsy* is used for other animals. *Dissection* is the act of opening a body (human or otherwise) to study its anatomy.
- Lice die at temperatures over 130 degrees Fahrenheit.

Search Engine Rabbit Holes have included:

- Paper pulp and papermaking
- Alternatives to catnip
- Cultures where women have face tattoos
- Natural dye fixatives for plant fibers vs. protein-based fibers
- Types of parasitic fungus
- *The Last of Us* concept art
- Symptoms of shock
- How pH affects hydrangeas
- Human-hair underwear

- Crochet underwear patterns
- Vocabulary for different kinds of feces
- Types of poisonous seaweed
- Glow-in-the-dark mushrooms
- History of high heels
- When did barbers first start also being surgeons?
- Lazy ironing techniques
- Chinese apothecary cabinets
- Chinese apothecary cabinets for sale near me
- Affordable Chinese apothecary cabinets for sale near me
- DIY Chinese apothecary cabinet instructions
- Dollhouse Chinese apothecary cabinets for sale near me
- Letter-sealing techniques
- Anatomy of wheat
- Anatomy of sweet potatoes
- Decaying process of severed limbs
- How to prepare a grasshopper to eat
- Grasshopper recipes
- Photographs of grasshopper dissections
- Bleeding in corpses in various stages of death
- Signs of arsenic poisoning
- The history of lace
- The “proper” way to drink tea with milk
- Fun science experiments for kids
- Closets
- Things babies shouldn’t eat
- Tang-dynasty metalwork
- Egg-laying behaviors of the duck
- Foods that increase a woman’s chest size
- Foods that prevent erections

I could keep going...but that might be a good place to stop for now. I hope this very incomplete tour has given you a peek at just how wide-ranging an editor’s job can really be. It’s part of what makes it such a satisfying profession. Until next time, have fun, read widely, and don’t be afraid of those rabbit holes! You never know where they might lead.



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